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Church of St. Thomas More, NYC
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Feast of Corpus Christi Luke 9:11b-17**

The Twelve Apostles were certainly very practical, hard-nosed realists. They were very much concerned with who ranked number one, two and three within their small group. They would report back to Jesus when they saw others who were healing people using His name (they wanted to preserve for themselves an exclusive franchise on His ministry). They would occupy their time thinking of ways to wreak vengeance upon those who did not treat them with sufficient respect.

In the section preceding today's Gospel we see the Twelve have just returned from their first mission on their own, preaching about the Kingdom of God, just as Jesus had taught them. While Jesus is discussing with them how things have gone, a large crowd comes upon the scene, and Jesus starts preaching to them about the Kingdom of God. Here we see the Twelve again acting true to form. After a long day they urge Jesus to wrap things up and dismiss the crowd. Tell them to go off and get food and lodging. Then Jesus asks the question that probably appears to them as the dumbest possible, "Why don't you give them something to eat?" This kind of response doesn't make sense to these hard-nosed realists. After all there are over 5,000 hungry mouths out there to be fed. The Twelve respond with that narrowness of vision that so often characterizes their speech in the Gospels, "We only have five loaves and two fish." Of course, they're right, but, as we'll see, they're not right at all. Jesus, always able to see the possibilities in the moment at hand, simply tells them to pass around what they have, and somehow the multitude is fed. It is but one more example, albeit a very dramatic one, whereby the vision of Jesus will not be hemmed in by the small minds of His followers.

For a moment, let's stop and take a look at ourselves, and see what does our own much vaunted hard-nosed practicality, our realism, do for us. Let's take the Twelve Apostles off the hook and see how often we speak the same kind of language--how often words like "only" and, never" characterize our speech. "I am only" (and you fill in the blank) or "I could never" (you fill it in again). All this is a variation of "I have only five loaves and two fish." And so long as we are content to paraphrase that excuse, so long as we are pleased to wallow in such pessimism, we will always be proved right. It is that kind of "false realism" that condemns us to repeat the past over and over again. How could things possibly be any different in my life!

But Jesus is the one of whom Scripture says, "Behold, I make all things new!"

And He says to each of us as He said to His apostles, "It doesn't have to be the way it always has been." We don't have to live our lives according to the script that our inadequacies and hesitations have crafted for us, nor do we have to play the role that other people's prejudice, schemes and self-interest have cast us in. So often, we sell ourselves short, we sell others short, when we do not take the risk that comes from failing to expand our vision, to dream big, to be willing to change, willing to start over again in some new way. So often, we accept the blanket judgments of the little world in which we dwell.

This is more than just "positive thinking." It is the realism that comes from a knowledge of how God works, the realism that marked the life of Jesus, who demonstrated that the conventional wisdom of society could never catch the possibility of who or what a person might become. Over and over again, we see Jesus awakening in people a sense of who they really are, despite what the vast, anonymous crowd was saying they could never be. So, phrases like "a leopard never changes its spots," or "you can't teach an old dog new tricks," have no place in the Christian vocabulary—either if used in accusation towards others, or directed in reproach towards oneself.

We might wonder how did Jesus feed this vast crowd, because the passage does not really tell us. Certainly Jesus could have multiplied the loaves and fish in some miraculous way. There is another possible explanation, one certainly less dramatic in its execution, but one that demonstrates, that enacts what the message of the Kingdom of God is all about. In the line just before today's passage we read that all this happened near the town of Bethsaida, situated on the eastern shore of the Lake of Galilee. The location is important because it is an area where many Jews lived alongside non-Jews. We can assume that the crowd to whom Jesus was preaching was a mix of both. We read that they numbered 5,000, but in the typical practice of that day, the women and children were treated as invisible. The crowd was no doubt a mix of men, women and children, Jews and non-Jews. In the time of Jesus, as in our own day, mothers would not go out for the day without bringing along some provision for hungry kids. It's quite possible, then, that when Jesus urged His disciples to begin sharing what they had, others in the crowd began doing the same. This, however, is the more remarkable part---that the Jews who were always very careful about what they ate, with whom they ate, and how they ate begin sharing food with non-Jews, something that would never be done in everyday life. In that sharing of food we see the barriers, the prejudices, the judgments set aside. Here we see people acting out, living out what the Kingdom of God is all about—coming together as the children of the one God.

This story of Jesus feeding the multitude is told no less than six times in the

Gospels. Just as significant is the fact that this was a very common theme that was used to decorate the walls of those places where the early Christians, again a mix of different groups of people, would gather to celebrate the Eucharist. In those gatherings could be seen the connection between Jesus' feeding of the multitude and what He did on the night before He died. In those gatherings could be seen the continuation of the reconciling ministry of Jesus that was dramatized in the feeding of the 5,000.

In our second reading we see how Jesus gave Himself to His disciples in the form of bread and wine, aware that in a few hours they would abandon Him completely. We shouldn't see this meal apart from all the other meals Jesus ate with His disciples. This was the Last Supper, but it had been preceded by so many other suppers wherein Jesus tried to reconcile, to heal all those thought to be beyond the possibility of redemption by the righteous people of His day. Jesus was criticized for eating with sinners, because by sharing food with them, He was sharing Himself with them as well. He gave legitimacy to those who were awarded no status in society. He gave acceptance to those who had internalized the judgments hurled at them. He showed love to those who had known only rejection and recrimination.

As we celebrate the feast of Corpus Christi, we are aware of the risen Christ present among us who continues His work of reconciliation, rescue and healing. Receiving the Eucharist is hardly to be seen as being awarded some kind of "gold star" for having been such a good Christian all week. It is rather the recognition that in one way or another we are like all those people with whom Jesus had supper during His earthly ministry—those who needed the encouragement and support He provided, those whose vision He expanded, those whom He enabled to change, taking the next best step in their lives.

We are fed on the Body of Christ to become the Body of Christ. We are nourished by His presence that we might be His presence in the world. Sharing in the Eucharist, receiving Holy Communion, is more than a solitary exercise of private devotion. It is to renew our commitment to discipleship within the community of faith. Let us pray that we can become like the One who nourishes us—that His wisdom and trust may penetrate our entire being, that, like Him, we learn to seize the possibilities at hand in every single moment.