

Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time – B

Last week we heard the story of Jesus scrapping his plans for some rest and restoration because of the great crowds who were languishing without a shepherd. His heart was moved with pity, and he shepherded them, teaching them many things.

Mark follows that scene with the story of the feeding of the multitude with a few loaves of bread and a few fish. That story is found on all four Gospels. It must have been one of the most important parts of the oral tradition which gave rise to the Gospels.

Because the story is found in all four Gospels, it makes for an easy transition point for going from Mark's Gospel to John's, which we will be reading from for the next several weeks. John's account is a little more developed than Mark's. He includes more details, all of which have theological importance.

John places this event near the feast of Passover, for example, and that helps to connect it with saving events from the past and salvation through Jesus' death on the cross.

John also includes the detail that Jesus knew that he was going to perform a sign on the occasion. If Jesus planned to feed the people, his question to the disciples takes on a new significance. When Jesus asks Philip, for example, where they can buy food, it comes across as a test. Would Philip realize Jesus' power? Would he show compassion for the hungry?

Seems like Philip failed the test. His focus immediately goes to the difficulty of feeding so many people. Andrew does only a little better. He locates a source for a few loaves and fishes, but then asks "but what good are these for so many?" Neither

disciple sees Jesus' capability in the matter, nor do they readily accept the invitation to become a part of what will be a momentous event.

One reason this story and others like it were so important to the early Christians was that it helped attract others to the faith. Belief in Jesus' resurrection was supported by traditions of him doing extraordinary acts during his life, that was a good selling point.

Beyond that, these stories offer examples and principles for Jesus' followers. Jesus recognizes the needs of his community, and he responds quickly and effectively. He shows himself to be selfless in serving others, is adaptable and concerned for their welfare. Following Elisha's example from the first reading, he even makes sure that the leftovers are gathered up and not wasted.

The early Church was not noted for an ability to repeat what Jesus had done. There are no stories of multiplications of the loaves and fishes in the Acts of the Apostles, for example. But the community of disciples did understand that they had a role to play in the miracle of becoming the Body of Christ in the world. They picked up on the fact that they would have to bring something to offer for the work of salvation to be complete.

Philip's failure was a lack of hope. He saw the situation with the multitude as hopeless and so wasn't prepared to participate when asked. The boy with the five loaves and two fish was willing to let Jesus do with his contribution what he would.

Hopeless situations remain hopeless if no one takes the risk of offering their gifts for the sake of a solution, even if what that

Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time – B

solution is still lies out of view. This is what we do as Christians. We recognize that God can use our gifts in ways that we do not even recognize. Not only can he, but he calls us to become co-workers with him.

The prophet Elisha understood that. He knew how far twenty barley loaves would go, and he knew how many people were looking to be fed. The math didn't seem to add up. But Elisha had also experienced the power of God and knew better than to sell God short.

In what ways are we inclined to write off our potential contribution to alleviating suffering and bringing things into right relationship before God? When do we say to ourselves, “What good will that do?” or “What can I do, I’m just one person?” forgetting that God is not asking us to save the world singlehandedly, but simply to contribute to his work as we are able, trusting that he will take what we offer and use it to greater effect that we can imagine?

Imagine the surprise of the boy who gave the five loaves and two fish when he was presented with one of the baskets full of the leftovers. He may have said to himself, “My gift did all that?” There’s an old saying in the environmental movement, “Think globally, act locally.” That, too, is an expression of hope and trust that God will take all that we offer and fold it into the work of salvation he is bringing into being for the whole world.