

Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time
July 28, 2024

Today's readings invite us to become humble instruments in God's hands by sharing our blessings with our needy brothers and sisters. They focus on hunger and food and how we can satisfy the deeper hunger of our life.

The first reading tells us how the prophet Elisha, by invoking God's power, fed one hundred men with twenty barley loaves. Elisha relied not on what he had but on what God would do with what the Prophet had received as a gift. This miracle foreshadows the Gospel account of Jesus' miraculous feeding of the pursuing crowd seeking their Lord and Master.

In today's Gospel, Jesus' miraculous feeding of the five thousand people, using five barley loaves and two fish offered by a boy in the crowd, is associated with the Holy Eucharist early in the Church's tradition. That is why it is described in all four gospels.

I believe most of us want the world to be different, don't we? We know that the world can be a much better place. We know in our hearts that this cannot possibly be the way God wants it. We wish that there would never be any more wars. We wish that not a single person would ever have to go to bed hungry. We wish that human beings would stop polluting the planet and stop contributing to its changing climate. We wish that everyone would have good schools and safe homes and decent jobs and access to healthcare.

We wish that more spouses would be faithful to each other and that parents would never hurt their children and that everyone (individuals and governments) would be honest and responsible and fair. And we certainly wish every religious leader and every person in any kind of authority would provide a better example to those they are privileged to lead. Yes, we all would like for the world to be different. And the distance from where we are to where we want to be appears to be a long one. A very long one.

Children would almost certainly not see it that way. Once boys and girls get old enough to begin to “understand” the world around them, begin to hear about these serious issues for the first time, they often can’t understand why we adults don’t simply “fix” them. War? Just stop fighting. Hunger? Just grow more food and/or spread it around better. Climate change? Stop putting so much junk into the air. Better schools? Just collect more money from the people and buy the best stuff and hire the best teachers and give every student the best chance possible. You see, for kids, no problem seems too big. Everything is possible, both for themselves and the world around them.

But we adults know better, for we have been around the block. We know way more than they do. We’ve seen things. We know about all the different angles and opinions and ideas and obstacles. And we certainly “know human nature” in ways that children certainly do not. Kids may want all these problems to be fixed by us grownups, and we might feel the same way too. But the difference is, we know that it’s not really possible. The problems are just too big, too complicated, too entrenched in society and in human history.

Or are they?

**“There is a boy here who has five barley
loaves and two fish;
but what good are these for so many?”**

Andrew, in today’s Gospel passage from St. John, felt the problem he and his friends were facing was too big. Philip too, as did probably everyone who heard Jesus suggest that they try to feed all those who had followed him across the Sea of Galilee. After all, the crowd was in the thousands.

“ . . . but what good are these for so many?”

It seems like a perfectly reasonable response. Andrew was no dummy. And neither are we. After all, there must be countless millions of people

who go to bed hungry every single night. There are probably countless millions who go to bed at night fearful that they might be harmed or abducted or bombed while they sleep. There are countless millions who have no electricity or natural gas with which to cook their meals or warm their homes or refrigerate their food. There are countless millions who are just one infectious illness away from dying. In other words, there are countless millions of people who appear to have little or no hope, no chance to a decent job, or a decent roof over their head, or a chance to build their own happy, healthy and safe family. It's really quite sad and a challenge. So many problems. Huge problems. All over this world of ours. And all we have are five loaves and two fish.

It's hard not to look at the size of the problem when considering what to do or not to do. It's hard to not "size up the situation" before deciding whether to act or not to act, get involved or sit on the sideline. It's hard not to look at the totality of a problem and think to ourselves, "What difference could I possibly make? I'm just one lonely person." I am just five loaves and a couple of fish.

And I believe we're right in a certain sense. We don't know and can't know. But that's not our job. That's not the kind of life God is asking us to lead, one in which everything is calculated and planned and evaluated and mapped out. You see, it really doesn't matter if we don't know how God is going to take the little we can each provide and turn it into something wonderful and life-changing for others. In the eyes of God no problem is too big and no act of love too small or unimportant or insignificant.

The truth is that in God's world, in God's kingdom, even small things can make a huge difference. Even small things can, in a very real sense, change the world. Even a couple of fish and five loaves can feed every single person who is hungry. In other words, every act of love, true love, can mend a broken heart, heal a deep wound, quench a thirst, dissolve a grudge, soften an angry soul, comfort a lonely person, build a bridge and fill an empty stomach. That's the miracle of faith.

And so, that's what we are invited to recommit ourselves to this day, recommit ourselves to not letting the immensity of the problems we face, drive us to inaction. Rather, we are called to tackle the big problems one small act of love at a time. And there can be no excuses because every single one of us was created just to do precisely that.