

**Homily - 18th Sunday in Ord. Time "A" -
St. Monica's: August 3, 2014**

Isaiah 55:1-3 - Let all who hunger and thirst come to the water.

Psalms 145 - You open your hand to feed us, you answer all our needs.

Romans 8:35-39 - Nothing will separate us from the love of God, made visible in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Matthew 14:13-21 - Multiplication of the loaves and fishes. "You give them something to eat." "Bring them here to me." All were satisfied.

Because it appears in all four Gospels, the multiplication of the loaves and fishes – and the Bread of Life discourse that follows it in the Gospel of John – is a frequent homily topic in the summer months. What might this passage be speaking to us today – as individuals, as parish community, as global family?

In St. Matthew's Gospel, we are told that great crowds followed Jesus to a deserted place where he had withdrawn – presumably to get away from them! Yet in compassion, Jesus healed their sick and taught them at length. At the end of the day, the disciples remind Jesus that it's getting late and that it's time to send the crowds home for dinner. But Jesus says something unexpected – and disturbing: *"They need not go away. You give them something to eat."* Understandably, they begin to panic: "he can't be serious – five loaves and two fish is barely enough for us, let alone everyone else." But Jesus is adamant: take what you have, bring it to me, offer it to be blessed, and then share it. Trust in me to do the rest.

What Jesus says to his disciples, he says also to us. For we look around us, and we see so much hunger in our world, and never enough food; so many needs, and resources that seem totally inadequate to meet them. I think of our resourceful food pantry volunteers, stretching what they have to meet expanding needs, opening in the summer this year for the first time – trusting that God will provide, through the generous support of our community and of new donors. I think of the many hungers which exist in our world - for food and shelter, for love and friendship, for justice and peace, for God - and how Jesus invites each of us to bring all that we have, small though it may seem, and use it to nourish others.

Jesus tells us in the Gospel today that what we have to share can and does make a difference. When we entrust it to God, things which seem impossible begin to happen. This is what it means to not only receive the Eucharist, but to celebrate it: in order to truly "become what we receive," Christ's Body, we too need to be taken, blessed, broken, shared.

Sometimes, a helpful way to draw new fruit from a familiar Gospel story is to have a closer look at the texts which accompany it. If we have responsibility for others – as a parent, or teacher, or supervisor – we may relate most readily with the apostles: the pressure of not knowing what to do with this huge crowd, the sense that what I have to offer seems totally inadequate, the temptation to just run away, or to rely only on my own resources, chopping that bread and fish so fine it all turns to mush. When I am tempted to rely only on myself, Jesus says: “Bring it to me. You can’t do this all by yourself. Let me in.”

If we read this Gospel through the lens of our first reading, Isaiah’s invitation to “come to the water”, then we experience from the point of view of those coming to be fed. We hear God say to us: “let everyone who thirsts come to the water. Let those who are hungry come and be satisfied.” I encounter a God who desires to nourish me, who cares for my every need, who answers our deepest human desires – of body and mind, of heart and spirit. God calls everyone to this type of relationship. It isn't a question of money, or power, or Church affiliation, or intrinsic holiness, or being better than anyone else. The vision of Isaiah, of Jesus, of the Psalmist, is a God “who opens his hands to feed us, who answers all our needs, who is full of grace, mercy and compassion.”

Because the readings from Paul are sequential (follow the order in the Bible) rather than thematic (chosen specifically to go with the Gospel, like the Old Testament reading), homilists often ignore them, finding it easier to speak about the Gospel. But it's impossible to let a reading like today's go by without highlighting it. For the last eight weeks, we have been listening to excerpts from St. Paul's letter to the Romans. Just as a great film or novel builds to a powerful climax, as Beethoven's Ninth Symphony bursts forth into the great chorus of the "Ode to Joy", St. Paul builds his reflection on what it means to be led by the Spirit of God, to embrace what it is to be a son or daughter of God, to a soaring rhetorical question: ***“Who - or what - can separate us from the love of Christ?”***

Just in case we couldn't come up with any answers of our own, Paul comes up with about sixteen possibilities: hardships, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, perils, the sword; death, life, angels, rulers, the present, the past, the future, earthly powers, heights and depths. Every possible obstacle to God's grace, every conceivable human and spiritual struggle (the ones he knew about, anyway), is identified. It all builds to a rousing conclusion: **“None of these things - nothing in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”**

Paul is aware of the struggles we face in our walk of faith, of the obstacles we encounter as we journey through life. Any one of us could add to this list, based on our own experience: unemployment, addiction, insecurity, disability, mental illness, discrimination, exile, divorce, abuse, grief, neglect, betrayal, confusion, rejection. St. Paul assures us that no matter what pain or struggle in our lives, the power of Christ, of his life, death and Resurrection, can and will triumph over all. For NOTHING can separate us from the love of God. Even my own refusal to accept God's love cannot change that basic fact. God just can't give up on us. Nothing can take that away from us. What **is** in my power is whether or not I choose to welcome that love, to embrace it, to live out of it, to share it.

Once we realize this, a huge burden is lifted from our shoulders. We don't have to earn God's love. God doesn't love us, feed us, care for us because he owes us, because of anything we have done. God loves us for who we are; God loves us because God is who He is. In Jesus, God's love became tangible, visible in a new and total way. He shows us the way.

This helps us to see today's Gospel in a new light. Most of us, faced with the task of feeding five thousand people, would probably panic. All we would see is the impossibility of the task, all the potential obstacles. (I feel that way if the number I have to feed gets higher than ten!) So we lose hope; we throw up our arms and give up, or we develop ulcers. Instead, let us look at Jesus. He refuses to be drawn into fear and anxiety. Jesus takes what is given him, gives thanks to God for it, enlists the help of his friends, shares it out generously. And Scripture tells us that there was more than enough to go around.

So must it be with us. As we come before the Lord today, let us give thanks to him for all that he has given us - even if some days, it doesn't seem like enough. Let us not be afraid to confide our fears and anxieties to him, knowing that he is our sure support and our strength. Let us offer him not only all that we **have**, but everything we **are** - and be willing to share not only the goods we possess, but the goodness which God has planted deep within us. And having shared generously of our gifts, let us trust in God's power to multiply our efforts as we share in his task of healing and feeding the world. **You open your hand to feed us, Lord; you answer all our needs.**