

18th Sunday in Ordinary Time 8th Sunday after Pentecost (2014)

We are facing some immense problems just now in our country. We are facing some immense problems at the global level as well. All you need to do is to listen to the radio or watch the news a little bit to get a sense of this. The gap between rich and poor within nations, and the gap between first world nations and third world nations, is getting bigger and deeper, not smaller. In the United States, we are experiencing a kind of political bifurcation and division that we have not seen for a very long time, and on top of that the disparity between those who have wealth and those who do not is greater than any time since the era of the robber barons in the 1920s.

And all of this can lead us into tremendous frustration and anxiety and just perplexity about what needs to be done. The response of the disciples to the situation in which they found themselves is one that can resonate very much in us as well. “Look, there is a whole of people here, we can’t feed them, we can’t give them what they need, so, Jesus, just send them away. Get them out of here. Let them go into the villages and do the best they can for themselves. Because we can’t help them. The problem is overwhelming; we can’t do anything about it.”

Have you ever felt like that? Have you ever felt just overwhelmed and nonplussed at what needs to be done in the face of enormous problems of one kind or anything. And the easiest solution seems just to give up?

It's Jesus' reaction to this real-life moment with his disciples which strikes me as absolutely fascinating and really very challenging for us. And as it frequently was, Jesus' response to the disciples in this situation was both unexpected and at first seemingly unrealistic.

Jesus is always delighted, it seems, when the people who hang around with him are thinking about the needs of others. And that's a good idea- thinking about other people- a good first step his disciples are taking in this story- they are concerned enough about the people who are obviously hungry that they want to send them away to find something to eat.

But what often then happens in the gospels is that Jesus takes these good ideas of his friends and does something startling with them. "If you really cared for the people," Jesus tells the disciples, "why don't *you* give them something to eat?" And isn't this often what can happen to us- our small ideas of what to do, how to help other people, gets bounced back at us with what seems to be a huge and impossible

proposal. And then we balk, and we squirm, and we protest: We can't do that! We don't have the time. We don't have the energy. We don't have the money. We don't have the ability. "All we have are five loaves and two frickin' little fish".

And that's the next step in this strange Jesus process. "Oh, you do have five loaves and two fish". That's great! You say it's impossible to feed these people. But it's not. If everyone is prepared to give what they have- but that might mean that they'll be a little hungrier- then God can act .

The little that the disciples could find- five loaves and two fish- is offered. It seems totally inadequate. But this is crucial both in the story and in our own lives. We too can offer to Jesus, often quite uncomprehendingly, what little we have, and it can appear to be totally inadequate to the tasks at hand; it can appear to be as useless as a meal of five loaves and two fish in a crowd of several thousand people.

And Jesus then takes our ideas, our loaves and fish, our money, our sense of humor, our time, our energy, our talents, our love, our artistic gifts, our skill with words or with music, our quickness of eye or fingers, whatever we have and whatever we are willing to offer. He holds them before His Father in prayer and thanksgiving and blessing. He breaks them so that they are ready to be used. And He gives them

back to us so that we can share them with others. And now what we offered we receive. Our gifts that we gave are gifts that we now get back. They are both ours and no longer ours. They are both what we had in mind and something more, something different, something greater, more powerful, more mysterious.

Does all of this remind you of something? Does it remind you of the Eucharist? Gifts given, Gifts received back- different, other, greater, far greater, than what we gave. But given back to us so that its effect, its power, can be shared with others. There is nothing more unchristian than to treat the Eucharist as if it were just some little private, cozy affair between my pitiful little soul and God. Every time I receive the Eucharist, I should be asking myself- and what difference will this make in my life? In the lives of the people around me? In the world I encounter and touch and shape? What difference *does* it make? And if it makes no difference, we then need to be asking ourselves whether we are approaching the Table rightly, with the Spirit of Jesus.

What precisely Jesus did with those five loaves and two fish, and what Jesus precisely does with what we give Him is so mysterious and so powerful that I don't think it can be described in words. But He does something with them. When we offer Him something real from our lives- and we know when it is real and when we're just game-playing- when we offer Him something real, it is as if we're somehow

caught up in the flow of the power of Jesus' compassion. And something then happens.

The world is in a mess. The economy is in a mess. Our politicians are in a mess. And often our Church is in a mess. And we want to yell out to somebody- anybody- do something about this! When we do that, we need to pause, take a breath, and listen to the gospel, listen to Jesus' words, "There is no need for them to go away; give them some food yourselves."

And for that to work, for God to work in and with and through and around us, all we need to do is to bring what we have, to offer it for His use, and then watch the mystery unfold.