

Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)

August 2, 2020

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“You give them something to eat.” ...“We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.” (Matthew 14:16-17)

### **My initial impression of the Multiplication of the Loaves**

I first read this story when I was nine years old. It was the episode of Jesus feeding the crowds by Lake Galilee. I always thought that Jesus of Nazareth was able to perform the miracle of increasing the loaves because he was God. And I was amazed that there was so much food left over, that more than 5,000 people were fed with only five loaves and two fish, and that women and children weren't included in that number.

About 20 years later, a few months before my priestly ordination, I was to preach a sermon on this event as a deacon. I remember noting at that time why Jesus said, "You give them something to eat." (Matthew 14:16) In John's Gospel, one of his disciples finds a boy with five barley loaves and two fish (John 6:8-9). But it was Jesus' gesture that impressed me the most: Having the people sit on the grass (spring was coming and there was a lot of greenery around the lake), Jesus took five loaves of bread and two fish, “looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And all ate and were filled.” (Matthew 14:19-20)

### **The account of Multiplication of the Loaves in the four Gospels: a complementary image and the second Multiplication**

I read and heard this story so many times that my mind would get confused: Every time I read the Bible, that happened as a seminarian and later even as a priest. As I read a new book I had just bought, I realized that this wonderful event

is usually treated as the Multiplication of the Loaves in the four Gospels. But I couldn't say what made each Gospel's version unique, and when I spoke, I would mix up what the four Gospels were saying. Personally, I remember every detail of what is written in John's Gospel (John 6:1-15). Why is that? It's because the people's reaction is described at the end of the narrative. When they saw this sign, that is, when their hunger was satisfied, we read: "They began to say, 'This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world.' When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself." (John 6:14-15)

Each Gospel has its own characteristics: Matthew, Mark, and Luke are similar because they are synoptic Gospels. The Gospel of John has more details about the context of the event and the season. The season was spring, for the Passover was approaching. Naturally, there was new grass growing there. We find the names of Philip and Andrew, and they're discussing it with Jesus. And it describes the reaction of the people too. But it doesn't say that the disciples came to believe more that Jesus was sent by God.

I knew that Matthew and Mark wrote twice about the Multiplication of the Loaves (Matthew 14:13-21, 15:32-38, Mark 6:30-44, 8:1-10), and the second story emphasizes Jesus' compassion and the crowds' hunger. Then Jesus takes the lead and commands the people to sit on the grass.

**The key message: the greatest miracle is that Jesus had the people share what they had with one another**

When the disciples went to ask Jesus to miraculously resolve this situation, they wanted him to take responsibility for the community's hunger. Jesus, on the contrary, asks the disciples to take responsibility: "You give them something to eat." These words relate to the following proverb: "Pray to God with a sledgehammer," that is, we should pray and strive on one's own, keep hammering; "God helps the early risers"; "God helps those who help themselves."

The disciples thought that they were going to buy something to eat for money would solve the problem. Denied by Jesus, they are led to look not at money, but at what they have. And then they think about providing it for everyone equally. Therefore, the subject of this story may not be the Multiplication of the Loaves. Could it be rather called "Breaking, Distributing and Sharing"? What do you all think?

**Let's deepen our meditation: It is time not to be divided but to be united to help one another**

Jesus heals the sick who are brought in from different places and gives food to the hungry. The evangelists point out why Jesus does these things: It's because suffering moves his heart and inspires compassion and pity in him; it's because Jesus had deep compassion for the suffering of others. The disciples are distracted by the fact that it is already late. The conversation between Jesus and the disciples allows us to get into the deeper meaning of the episode known as the Multiplication of the Loaves. What the disciples point out to Jesus is practical and rational: "Send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves." (Matthew 14:15) They are saying that each of the crowds can go back to their own village and get what they have now that they have already received from Jesus what they asked for.

Jesus' response is surprising: "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." Hunger is a big problem. Ignoring it and letting each of them go to their own village doesn't solve it. It's not time to be divided, but it's time to be united together and share together with no one to be excluded.

The disciples point out to Jesus that they have only five loaves and two fish. That's okay, even the little we have is enough when we share generously. Jesus commands all the people to sit on the grass to share a meal. Then everything changes. The people who were about to separate into their own villages to satisfy their hunger sit around Jesus to share the little they have with him and be united. In this way, Jesus wants us to be a community of humanity.

What happened to the loaves and fish that were placed in Jesus' hands? He doesn't begin with multiplication but with a prayer of praise to God. He makes sure that this food comes from God and belongs to everyone. Then he breaks the loaves and gives them to the disciples. The disciples distribute them to the people. The loaves and fish are passed from person to person, one after another. This is how all people's hunger was satisfied.

#### Prayer

(1) Lord, may each of us who make up this church community be loaves of bread to our brothers and to the hungry in this world.

(2) May those who have no work, those who are hungry for bread, those who are hungry for justice and equality not lose their hope to be a new people who live by helping one another.

Let us pray: Lord, give us a heart that seeks you. Give insatiable hunger for love, justice and freedom to us and all our brothers and sisters. Give it especially to those who are structurally pushed into the corners of society in the world today. Give them a seeking heart. Lead our hunger not to any other idol than you, but to yourself, the God of love. We ask this in remembrance of Jesus, your Son and our brother. Amen.

Note: All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the New Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition (NRSVCE).