

God Feeding Us Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time/A August 3, 2014 9:00 AM
Is 55:1-3; Rom 8:35, 37-39; **Mt 14:13-21** (Faith helps us to identify and name this emptiness and shows us where to look to find what we need.)

This story we read this morning about **the feeding of the multitude** is one of the very few stories in the New Testament that appears in all four Gospels and in Matthew and Mark it appears twice, indicating that some really extraordinary event lies behind these stories. However, it probably backfired. We get that information from John's Gospel where Jesus starts turning away followers, disciples, saying: "**You are only following me because you had your fill of the loaves, not because you saw the sign.**" In other words, the purpose of **this great feeding was not just to fill people's stomachs.** No, it had another purpose, one that even the apostles didn't catch onto right away.

Now **Matthew** is writing his Gospel about fifty years after the death and resurrection of Jesus. So his story, the way he tells the story, his interpretation, is colored by the whole history of his people, his little church and their needs. He is **trying to tell them what the meaning of this event was**, not exactly what happened as much as what it meant. And the first clue we have that this is not just an ordinary eating of bread and fish is **the gathering of the fragments.** When you are at a picnic and you have leftover fragments of bread, you feed them to the birds. You do not collect them. This collecting of fragments in twelve wicker baskets is already **an allusion to the Eucharistic bread** that since the time of Christ has always been dealt with with great reverence, never just thrown away when Mass is over. And Matthew's community had gathered weekly for the breaking of bread for fifty years. So they are very familiar with the gestures of that ritual. And **Matthew's point is that both the feeding of the multitude and the Eucharist refer to the same reality.** They are both sacraments of the same reality, **which is God feeding us with the bread that has come down from heaven.**

Now this is very significant within the history of Israel because there is **all this talk about food**, if you have ever noticed—Old Testament and New Testament, both. It's always about food. The first reading: milk, wine, rich fare. There is always talk about banquets and weddings and verdant pastures and quail and manna, and the like—all the time. This is the **language of our Scriptures, and it's speaking about something other than what it says. We have to cue in on this.**

Matthew adds a very interesting point that doesn't come through the translation: they sat on green grass—**green grass.** Well, in that part of the world grass is only **green once a year: at the Passover time** after the spring rains. **Passover is the anniversary of Jesus' death and resurrection, which is celebrated in the Eucharist,** another tie-in to the meaning of this feeding event. This reference to green grass also refers back to the prophet Ezekiel. In chapter 34 verse 11 God says through the prophet, "**I myself will look after and tend my sheep.**" This is after expressing disgust with the rulers of Israel, the leaders. So God says, "I will do it myself." And in verse 14: "**They shall lie down on good grazing ground, and in rich pastures they shall be pastured.**"

Just as today, the early Church believed that it was the risen Lord, that **it is the risen Lord, that hosts the gathering of the Eucharist**, who invites his followers to the feast, and who presides through the person of some minister: blessing the bread, sharing it, and doing the same with the wine, the blood of the covenant. And all this was interpreted even by Matthew's church and ever since as a fulfillment of the prophecy found in Ezekiel in verse 15: **"I myself will pasture my sheep."** So we see the people sitting down in the pasture: God at work in Jesus. **Jesus is God's answer to the prophecy**, the fulfillment of the prophecy. Matthew doesn't want his community to think that this event was just about feeding empty stomachs, but rather it's God bringing the **substantial nourishment**, referred to in Isaiah in the first reading, **that we cannot provide for ourselves**. No matter how much money we have, we cannot provide that.

So this then is the point of the whole story: **God wants to give us what we cannot provide ourselves**. And if we really think and let down our defenses and become very quiet we will realize that actually there's always something, sometimes rather deeply unconscious in us, but there is always something not quite right. **There is some deep dissatisfaction we have with life**. This is not actually something wrong; it's something right. We are not supposed to be satisfied with life as we find it. And this deep dissatisfaction sometimes we don't even know what it is. But we are fashioned in the image and the likeness of God, so it stands to reason that **only God can be the ultimate desire of our hearts**. Only God can satisfy the hunger within. But as I mentioned, this hunger is often unconscious and therefore it gnaws at us and we don't know what's going on. It can make us feel ill. It can make us very uncomfortable. It can even produce nausea. **Some people** who consider themselves crazy or whom others consider crazy are really simply those who **keenly sense this emptiness that most people either ignore, avoid or deny**.

Now **this emptiness could motivate and can motivate a search for God, and that's what it's supposed to do**. But it also can motivate a number of substitutions, such as, the search for more excitement or better entertainment or accumulating more and more stuff. Much of the activities of people in the world that we can observe are really unconscious strategies to fill up this inner emptiness. And yet people who waste their lives away with such fruitless activity are regarded as normal and healthy. But those who can't stand the meaninglessness of it all are considered maladjusted, suffering from some undue anxiety or depression. Maybe they are profoundly honest.

Faith helps us to identify and name this emptiness and shows us where to look to find what we need. Since, again, we are fashioned by God in the divine image, no mere earthly treasure or person, no experience or pleasure, will be able to fill the infinite space within. But God can and desires to. **Our sharing in the Eucharist is our acknowledgement of God's generosity**, and it's already expressing gratitude for it, even before we receive the real gifts. And Jesus teaches us, inspires us, and motivates us to imitate the outpouring of divine love pictured in this story of the feeding of the multitude. This is the path to true happiness.