

Homily for the 18th Sunday in Ordinary Time

July 31-August 1, 2021

Readings: Exodus 16: 2-4, 12-15; Ephesians 4: 17, 20-24; John 6: 24-35

Preacher: Sonja Livingston

I have to confess that, like the Israelites grumbling in the desert, when my insecurities mount, I tend to focus on bread. I don't mean the "true bread of heaven" described in John's Gospel. I mean the bread of this world. I mean marble rye topped with cheddar, loaves of fennel-raisin from the public market and the Irish soda bread my husband makes, which is so perfect I could cry. I mean frybread from the reservation near Buffalo (which the Senecas call Ghostbread), skillet cornbread served with a side of red beans, and my mother's biscuits fresh from the oven and drizzled with honey.

The bread of this world isn't great for my waistline, but food is one of life's truest pleasures, and the body must be fed. But what about that other hunger, the longing that goes beyond physical sustenance, the desire that flour and water can't touch? The real problem with our attachment to bread and other consumables of this world is that we often reach for them when we actually want a taste of heaven.

Even as U.S. religious membership falls below 50% for the first time, as reported in the latest Gallup poll, our hunger for God does not subside. It cannot subside. It's built into our humanity, as essential as bones and breath. In fact, our consumption of worldly goods seems to grow more frenzied in direct proportion to our spiritual neglect. The more we try to fill ourselves with the bread of this world, the hungrier we become. This might explain why our collective desire (and frustration) is at an all-time high.

When I'm home in Rochester, I listen to a radio station that plays hits from the 1980s and '90s. These are songs from my era and I love singing along to Prince and The Bangles as I wash dishes or pull weeds. The station's tagline is *Everything, All the Time*. They clearly know their audience because we Americans do tend to want what we want, exactly when we want it. The culture has evolved to both inflame and sustain our appetites. Fast food. 24-hour shopping. Drone delivery. Part of what made COVID restrictions so challenging was that the steady systems

catering to our incessant hunger were temporarily upended. Now, as we get back to “normal,” we can again get everything we want with the push of a button and the swipe of a card. Except the bread of heaven, of course, which isn’t delivered via Amazon or Instacart.

Jesus says: “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me will never hunger.” This is big news! Isn’t an end to our deep hunger exactly what we’re after? So why is it so tough to partake? Perhaps because, unlike grabbing a dozen bagels or the latest iPhone, we can’t always “see” or “acquire” the bread Jesus offers—at least not immediately. Even the Eucharist was out of reach for many this last year. Certainly, we longed for it and are grateful to return to Mass, but we also hear the ongoing debate over who can and cannot receive and understand that God is bigger than this. In fact, while my favorite radio station promises *Everything, All the Time*, the slogan is better suited to God, who truly offers everything and is available all the time.

God doesn’t require a credit card or PayPal account. Jesus doesn’t mention political categories or moral prerequisites. He simply says, “whoever comes to me.” All that’s needed is our humble recognition of the need for God. How do we feed that relationship? With prayer and gratitude; by dwelling in the absolute preciousness of the moment; through generosity to others; kindness to children, strangers and small animals. In other words, we grow that most important of relationships the way we grow any relationship—with time, attention and love.

The next time you find yourself staring down a beautiful loaf—a golden challah from Malek’s, perhaps, or a seeded Sicilian from Savoia’s—set it aside for a moment and close your eyes. Breathe in. Locate God. Smile (this will be easy because you’ll be connected to God). Let the radiance soak every one of your cells. Say *Alleluia, Thank you or Amen*. The particular vocabulary does not matter as much as an open heart. Do this—and even before you bite into whatever food you’re fortunate enough to have on the table—you’ll have already truly been fed.