

Homily for the 17th Sunday in Ordinary Time

July 24-25, 2021

Readings: 2 Kings 4: 42-44; Ephesians 4: 1-6; John 6: 1-15

Preacher: Susan Howard

When I was 18 I traveled to Europe with a girlfriend. It was one of those bootstrap wild and crazy trips that one never forgets. We had lodging and summer jobs in a little town in the Alps of Switzerland.

How thrilling to live in the Alps, and see the wondrous sights of Spain, France and Italy. On one side trip in Spain I befriended a family on the train. They invited me for dinner. I was a little apprehensive but being open to adventure I accepted. Little did I know how it would change my view of the world forever. They lived in a little tiny apartment under the train tracks in a very poor part of town. Their meal was already simmering on a hot plate. A large pot of vegetables in a tomato sauce that smelled delicious. The English-speaking daughter explained that their mother would barter with the vendors of the local market for the almost rotten, bruised vegetables they had left over at the end of the day and would make them into soup. As I recall the bread was stale but when dipped in olive oil and then the soup it made a filling and tasty meal. Of course there's more to the story but that's for another time.

This particular meal experience made a lasting impression on me, a meal shared with the poor, who were so honored to have an American girl at their table. It was transforming in a way that most conversion moments are, humbling our self-centeredness and entitlement, bonding us to humankind at a new level. This meal came to mind while reading about the loaves of barley bread, food of the poor from the poor, that was given to Elisha and to Jesus.

Who knew how transforming that bread would become...How 20 small loaves would feed 100 and then five loaves and two fish in the hands of Jesus feeding 5,000.

Let's look at this crowd for a moment. Not just as numbers but as humans. In the reading from John the people were gathering in preparation for the Passover. There would have been family reunions, lovers anxiously waiting to meet each other, mothers and daughters, fathers and sons reuniting after months apart,

grandchildren running around, teens raising a ruckus, playing games, the elders complaining about the youth, thieves casing the crowd for spoils and recalcitrants just looking for trouble. People from every walk of life, the rich and the poor. The whole gamut of the human condition.

It is remarkable to note in our scripture passages that not one of them were questioned about the depth of their faith, whether or not they followed all the rules of their church or synagogue nor if they were followers of the politicians of the time. Jesus says, “have them recline” in other words, “they are all welcome to partake of my gifts.”

Imagine yourself in that scene. We also come to the table to be cured of illnesses, sickness of mind, body and spirit. We come to be restored to new life and for strength to bear up under the pressures and disappointments of everyday life, an oppressive society and a world rife with civil unrest and political turmoil. Maybe you’re just here to see people, to dispel your loneliness, or maybe you’re here because your family expects you to be here. You may not even be here to receive a miracle, but the gift is for you too.

These miracles—the cures, the feeding, the restoring—were then and are now free and overflowing from the love of God. They are available to each and everyone gathered at these tables of plenty. Elisha and Jesus let that love flow out! They did not act as gatekeepers of a treasure but as instruments of God’s pure love. They were able to let divine goodness flow into each human being they met. With humility, gentleness and patience they created a bond of peace.

We have an opportunity every day to extend that peace to one another. I have to ask myself, why would I hoard anything, physical goods or spiritual gifts, when there is always plenty for everyone. I find that it is a matter of trust in God’s bounty and God’s grace. It is something I have to pray about and have worked on my whole life. To be like that family in Spain who fed a stranger from their meager pot of soup. May God bless us with hearts that are overflowing.