

Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle B

Ephesians 4:1-6 and John 6:1-15

One Christmas, my oldest sister and her husband gave each member of the family an envelope with a rhyming verse inside. The verse was a clue to where the real gift was. Clues took some of us up to the cubbyhole, others down to the basement, still others into the woods to the creek. My gift was in the bin of oats in the barn. It was a crank. I was confused. When we all came back together, we discovered each of us had a piece of an ice cream maker. No one's gift made sense alone. We all needed to pool our gifts to get to the yummy dessert.

Fast forward to the present. Throughout the pandemic, the U.S. bishops lifted the obligation to go to Sunday mass in person. During that time, people found a variety of ways to manage, from "attending mass" online to doing secular activities instead. As the obligation is reinstated, it will be interesting to see how many people return. My family enjoyed the convenience of being able to attend at whatever time worked for us; we appreciated rejoining our old parish in Clarks Green, which was more of a spiritual home than we have been able to find in our current diocese. Should we go back to in-person mass every week – or even at all? Is there enough to entice us to return, especially if liturgies are lifeless or emphasize hierarchies, if homilies are dry or offensive and if community is lacking?

The short answer from the gospel this week, the feeding of the multitude, is a resounding "YES!" The early church so valued communal Eucharist that all four gospel writers tell this story; Mark and Matthew even tell it twice. In every version, a large, needy crowd seeks Jesus. This crowd is humanity in every age and place. Every generation is broken by sin and suffering; all long for love and wisdom. The vastness of the need seems impossible to address: we carry our individual wounds all the days of our lives and global problems seem insurmountable. We can echo Philip and say half our income would not begin to cover the cost. We can repeat Andrew's words: we have a few things but what good are they for so many? As we teeter on the brink of despair, Jesus will do what he always does: he will make what little we have more than enough. This is the core of the Good News of Christianity. Of course, we want to come back to church for this Bread of Life, freely, gratuitously given.

But if this is simply about each individual being fed by God, we are missing the full message. The early Christians understood that God came into the world to heal us, but they also believed that healing only happens when we are united in receiving God's gift. The Church is that unity. The individual parts of the ice cream maker only make sense when assembled. Jesus does not have intimate dinners with each person in the multitude. Everyone eats the same food and they eat together.

Although our individualistic and consumeristic culture tells us differently, we are essentially communal beings. Ephesians urges us to "live in a manner worthy of the call [we] have received." Being given all that we need ought to change us. Ephesians spells out the change: "live... with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another through love, striving to preserve the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace." We need to dial down the harshness with which we air our views. When obstacles are set up, when the other person won't change or welcome us, we must remember Jesus gives us more than enough. Do the work of loving in another spot. *We* are the Church of Christ; we are not just the B-team watching from the bench. If we pool our transformed selves, the gifts God has given us, what tremendous good will we be able to do? If we worship alone, how much less will we be? The parts of the ice cream maker only fulfill their purpose when assembled. So too the Church.

- ❖ What parts of Church life are hardest for you to tolerate? Ask God for the grace to carry on anyway.
- ❖ When have you felt united with the Church? How can you build on that?