

Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle B

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

I sometimes have to ask myself, "Am I eating to live or living to eat?" The distinction gets cloudy as I ogle a lengthy menu in a restaurant. If the calories are listed, they can clarify my answer quickly: desserts that are 1,500 calories usually get nixed. But this question is relevant daily as I sneak snacks or wonder is my lunch fabulous enough? Do I need this food or am I trying to fill some other need? This is the question of a privileged person, but everyone can get caught in it. Even as a poor child, I lived to eat and often dragged my feet over garden work that kept food on our table.

My struggle is common. Many people put on weight during the pandemic shut down and America has a high obesity rate. We are all familiar with the term, stress eating. What's more, we are tangled in other similar tensions: buying what we need vs. buying what we want; a positive body image vs. fixating on appearances; and healthy self-esteem vs. feeling superior to others, to name a few.

Our passage today from Ephesians calls this the futility of our minds. The Greek word, *mataistati*, here translated as futility, also means vanity. In vs 18-19, which we do not read, the author explains that *mataistati* involves three things: darkening our mind to understanding, letting ignorance alienate us from our life in God and hardening our hearts, i.e. ceasing to feel pain morally, to feel guilt. Futility of the mind keeps us from doing the good that we want to do in a way that is easy to disregard. The actions may look good on the surface or make sense to us in our mind's eye, but the motives are not of God. St. Thérèse of Lisieux wrote about this muddle: "I had a great desire, it is true, to practice virtue, but I went about it in a strange way."¹ E.g., when she was hurt that her family did not appreciate her kind acts as much as she expected, she recognized that the acts were motivated by self-glorification rather than love, although she meant to do them out of love.

So it is in Ex 16. Three days after they walked through the Red Sea and escaped Pharaoh's prodigious army, the Israelites complain about their freedom because of hunger. Really? God graciously replies by raining manna and quail daily. In the verses we do not read, some folks try hoarding the manna, while others fail to gather enough. Ever gracious, God alters the amount in everyone's basket so that they have enough. There is enough food in the world for everyone, enough dignity, love, care, money, power, beauty and truth; God has made a world of plenty for all of us. Hoarding dignity, ignoring science, being anxious over losing control and refusing to understand one another are all signs of futility of the mind. Can we put away the old self of our former life, corrupted as it is by deceitful desires? Can we be renewed in the spirit of our minds and put on the new self, who knows the truth of Jesus?

The crowd in Jn 6 twiddles with the same ambiguity. They ask Jesus questions that sound foolish to everyone but themselves. Jesus' answer to each question is the need to believe in him. He is the one whom God sent to give life to the world. Notice: it is life for the world, not just for some. Notice: it is a gift, not a prize or something we earn. Notice: Jesus offers himself as the Bread of Life against the backdrop of feeding the multitude. We cannot understand the subtle choice before us, muddled as the waters are by the futility of our minds, unless we eat together and talk. It is in respectful conversations that our common humanity is discovered and our restless hunger is eased. God does the work of feeding us body and soul. We have to name what gets in the way and let go of it.

- ❖ Consider a current issue that gets you upset, e.g. racism, COVID-19 vaccinations or partisan politics. How much of your position is motivated by real love and how much by something else?
- ❖ Talk with God about how to be less concerned with having what you love; instead, love what you have right now.

©08-01-21 Bernadette Rudolph

¹ *Story of a Soul*, ICS Publications. 1996. p. 97.