

by Joan Mitchell, CSJ

Light a candle at the center of your group as a sign of God's presence with, within, and beyond us. Pray from Sunday's second reading as follows:

LEADER: O God, from whose love no power in all creation can separate us,
ALL: Deepen our awareness of your love in our hearts and in our lives.

LEADER: May we reach out in compassion to those in need,

ALL: And work for justice for all who suffer.

LEADER: We come to listen to God's word.

ALL: We listen that we might live the gospel.

Tables. We sit at them to eat. Almost everybody has one. We need our daily bread to give us the energy to live, learn, and earn. Sometimes we make the food we eat, sometimes we buy it. Sometimes it's fast food from the drive in, sometimes fresh food from the garden. Not every table can serve three meals a day or sets a full table near the end of the month.

We make decisions around tables, policies that affect our neighbors near and abroad. Some of these tables are long with someone at the head.

SUNDAY

by SUNDAY

Some are round where people all have a say. People seeking the common good want seats at these tables where people decide who eats and how much.

We welcome those closest to us at our tables and make new friends when we bring them into our intimate circles. We celebrate birthdays and holidays extending the table and welcoming guests.

Our tables are also places where we can belittle and exclude one another. School cafeterias and dining rooms at senior living facilities can be places where people leave others out or distance themselves. Daily meals give us so many chances to welcome those left out to our tables.

At every Eucharist we gather around our altar tables where everybody has a seat if they want one. People who may be strangers or neighbors or family remember together how Jesus poured out his life in love. In fact it's Jesus' compassion that holds a crowd into the dinner hour in Sunday's gospel. It's compassion that makes Jesus want to feed the crowd.

Jesus notices people are sick and feels for them. He notices people are hungry and feeds them. Compassion motivates him. He observes what people need and responds.

- Who has pulled up a chair at your table lately?
- With whom have you eaten for the first time lately?



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GOSPEL

Jesus makes a messianic banquet of five loaves and two fish.

NARRATOR: Now when Jesus heard of John the Baptist's death, he withdrew in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. When it was evening, the disciples came to him.

DISCIPLES: This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves.

JESUS: They need not go away; you give them something to eat.

DISCIPLES: We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.



JESUS: Bring them here to me.

NARRATOR: Jesus ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples. The disciples gave them to the crowds. All ate and were filled. They took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. Those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

Matthew 14.13-21

● If we imagine this gospel scene in a contemporary setting, who do you see in the crowd and what are their needs?

● Toward whom are you feeling especially compassionate in your life?

Contrary to Jesus' compassionate involvement with the people who follow him, the crowds worry Jesus' disciples. What will all these people eat? They urge Jesus to send the people away to buy food.

Earlier, Jesus sent his disciples out to teach and heal as he does and gather believers to form the new community of Israel. Jesus commissions 12 to become apostles, a number representing all the original tribes of Israel. Here two chapters later, the disciples fail to imagine they have anything to give the people.

Jesus reiterates his commission and challenges them directly, "You give them something to eat." In these words the story shifts from an event in Jesus' life to a story with significance in the later life of the Church when these disciples must do what Jesus did—teach, heal, and feed the community of believers.

During Jesus' time in the desert before he begins his public mission, Satan urges him to turn stones into bread to satisfy the starving (4.3). But Jesus refuses, insisting that "one does not live by

Jesus calls us to be compassionate disciples.

Because Matthew organizes his telling of Jesus' story like a well-catalogued library, the Church has heard and reflected on Jesus' parables, which Matthew places in chapter 13, for the past three Sundays. In chapter 14, Matthew begins to follow Mark's narrative. Both Mark and Matthew tell two stories of Jesus feeling multitudes—first 5,000 on the Jewish side of the Sea of Galilee and then 4,000 on the Gentile side of the lake.

As this Sunday's gospel begins, Jesus withdraws by himself after hearing King Herod has beheaded John the Baptist. The gospels see John the Baptist as Jesus' precursor, preparing his way. John's violent death hints at Jesus' own and motivates Jesus to seek solitude.

Matthew pictures Jesus recognizing and feeling the troubles and pains those in the crowd bring to him, and he brings them God's healing.

bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God” (4.4). Here Jesus believes in feeding the crowd. He will not let them go hungry of body or mind.

Jesus’ disciples cannot neglect people’s most basic needs. Matthew anticipates a future in which Jesus’ disciples sustain the poor.

As Jesus’ disciples today, Matthew calls us into this future. Indeed, in Matthew the messiah’s last public words are the solemn warning that the judgment on the last day will be what we have done to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, to shelter the homeless (25.32-46). We continue the mission of Jesus, the compassionate messiah, who will not abandon the crowd but will provide from what he has. Jesus identifies not just with the crowd but with the least.

● In what ways do you send the crowd away to buy bread for themselves?

● In what ways do you provide hungry people something to eat?



Jesus makes a messianic feast of five loaves and two fish; he makes a lot of the very little food the crowd has. The story tells us they have more than enough—12 baskets full of leftovers.

The scene hints of the good shepherd. Jesus orders the people to sit on the grass as he provides for them. Jesus’ blessing of the loaves shifts what is happening into an eucharistic scene. “He looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to his disciples.”

Blessed, broke, and gave—these are the verbs that describe Jesus’ actions at the Last Supper, “Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it,

broke it, gave it to the disciples and said, ‘Take, eat; this is my body.’” These are the verbs the celebrant repeats at every Eucharist.

Clearly Matthew wants us to recognize the bread that proves so abundant in this miracle is the bread of the eucharist, the bread that Jesus makes a sign of his body, a sign of his total self-giving to the people of all time. We eat this bread to nourish our own commitment to live as Jesus lived—to give and provide for others ourselves, out of our love and gifts.

What makes a parish a community rather than a crowd? People receive holy communion in order to become a holy community, the body of Christ in our world. Groups work together in service projects, a monthly Loaves and Fishes meal, or fundraisers like a Christmas tree sale or Lenten Friday fish dinners. People keep up friendships and make friends of strangers.

● What helps make your parish a community rather than a crowd?

DO SOMETHING

CHARITY

JUSTICE

- Participate in programs that feed and supply food to people in your neighborhood experiencing food insecurity.
- Go out of your way at the Sign of Peace to greet someone who stands apart.
- Visit Heifer International online or another group working to end hunger globally. Find a way to participate.

Food for those who hunger for justice.

As the rise of Persian power holds out hope for Israel's restoration from exile in Babylon, the prophet known as Second Isaiah begins to preach and call the exiled people home. He invites them to a table where bread, wine, and milk are abundant and free.

Second Isaiah quickly follows the invitation to come and eat with a question about what is true bread and satisfying food. Eating what is good and delighting in rich food are metaphors for keeping the Law. The true bread that Isaiah promises a restored Israel is the teaching that comes from God.

Listening to God's word is the only real and satisfying source of life. In this listening Israel will hear God renew the everlasting covenant evident in God's steadfast and sure love for David. The word of promise that goes forth from God's mouth will not return empty.

In the next chapter Isaiah spells out the teaching that will form the basis of God's "everlasting covenant" with the messiah, the Son of David: "Maintain justice, and do what is right, for soon my salvation will come, and my deliverance be revealed" (Isaiah 56.1).

In Jesus' day, Isaiah's words helped fuel expectations that the messiah would bring the real satisfaction of human need. Thus, they form a fitting background for Sunday's gospel.

Matthew portrays Jesus as the very messiah of whom Isaiah spoke. In his inaugural sermon on the mount, Matthew's Jesus pronounces a blessing on those who "hunger and thirst for justice, for they shall be satisfied" (5.6). The messiah provides teaching from God and bread for the poor. He calls us to do the justice the word speaks.

Eat what is good.

Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food.

Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live. I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David.

Isaiah 55.1-3

● What does "hungering for justice" mean? How does one feel this kind of hunger?

PRAY

Spend some time in quiet reflection. Where do you feel a hunger for justice right now? To what action for justice do you feel led? Bring your reflections on these questions to prayer.

LEADER: Loving God, you have made us and know our deepest desires:

ALL: **Whet our appetites for your justice and your peace in our world.**

Voice your own petitions for people in need and express your commitment to do the word you hear.

LEADER: Jesus, Bread of Heaven, feed us on your word:

ALL: **Move our hearts in compassion for the needy around us. Amen.**

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