

by Joan Mitchell, CSJ

Light a candle at the center of your prayer circle. Place a small loaf of bread on a plate beside it. Pray together from Sunday's second reading, Ephesians 4.1-6.

LEADER: There is one body and one Spirit.

ALL: Let us bear with one another in love.

LEADER: There is one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all.

ALL: Let us preserve peace and unity among us.

Jesus feeds a huge crowd in Sunday's gospel on five loaves and two fish. John's gospel refers Jesus' healing and feeding actions not as miracles but as signs. A sign involves a concrete and physical action that points beyond what we see or experience

A stop sign points to an intersection with busy cross traffic people may not see. A billboard with someone in cap and gown points to the unseen benefits of a college degree. In John's gospel five loaves that

feed thousands become a sign of who Jesus is

The Church breaks off from reading Mark's gospel and for five Sundays reads from John 6 with its theological reflection on Jesus as the bread of life. The mathematics alone—5 loaves, 2 fish, 12 baskets of leftovers—signals this feeding points to more than we see and draws us into deeper reflection.

Occasionally, I hear people take the miraculous out of Jesus' feeding 5,000. In their concrete explanation Jesus convinces people to share the food they have for themselves. Once on a study trip to Corinth, the tour leader seated me for lunch with two older Greek women. I don't speak Greek, not did they speak English but that didn't deter them from signaling me to that I should eat the bitter greens in the salad. So I did.

Then graciously the women proceeded to open big purses and offer large, carefully wrapped squares of moussaka. It looked like lasagna. They had packed their own cold lunch. I accepted.

But is this the case in the gospel? The explanation assumes that after Jesus blesses the five

loaves and two fish, the people in the crowd break open their stashes and share the food they have carried with them. The miracle and the message become sharing what one has.

The story, however, does not include these details. We have to add them. The story never mentions people with pockets and bundles full of stashed food. Explaining the feeding in this concrete way closes off interpretation; it doesn't open our minds to the mystery of who Jesus is and what he reveals.

● To what do you see the multiplication of the loaves pointing?



GOSPEL

What good is so little for so many?

NARRATOR 1: Jesus crossed the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias. A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples.

NARRATOR 2: Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. When Jesus looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip—

JESUS: Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?

NARRATOR 1: Jesus said this to test Philip, for he himself knew what he was going to do.

PHILIP: Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little.

NARRATOR 2: One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said—

ANDREW: There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?

JESUS: Make the people sit down.

NARRATOR 1: Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all.

NARRATOR 2: Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted.

NARRATOR 1: When they were satisfied, Jesus told his disciples—

JESUS: Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost.

NARRATOR 2: So they gathered them up. From the fragments of



the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets.

NARRATOR 1: When the people saw the sign that Jesus had performed, they began to say—

CROWD: This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world.

NARRATOR 2: When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.

John 6.1-15

For what do we hunger?

by Shawn Madigan, CSJ

Like a jazz piece in which musicians play a simple melody before spinning out countless variations, John in his chapter six tells the core story of Jesus multiplying loaves and fishes before he reflects at length theologically on all this sign expresses. Even the core story is elaborate. The disciples Philip and Andrew raise perennial problems.

The disciples' conversation with Jesus shows they keep bumping into limits, hitting the wall. Five loaves and two fish are obviously too little to feed

the hungry crowd. However, then as today, the limits the community faces don't turn on how much or little food is available. The real crisis lies in the disciples' own resources. Their limitations become the Church's limitations.

Philip is limited in imagination. He sees they can't possibly feed the crowd. In our own time do we hear echoes of Philip in voices that say, "There are not enough priests, so we can no longer have the bread of life for everybody who is hungry."

Andrew is more imaginative than Philip. He notices the boy with the loaves and fish and prefers to feed some people rather than none. Andrew also recognizes that five loaves and two fish are entirely inadequate to feed the whole gathered group.

In our day dioceses have clustered faith communities, so priests can gather more people for Eucharist and serve them. Some protest the closing of their parishes. Some happily join the new clusters. Some lose interest in making relationships in the new community.

The boy never speaks to tell how he sees the crisis of resources. He adds the

dimension of youth to John's account. He seems willing to share all that he has, hopeful that someone will make a little into something more. He is open to possibilities where his elders see limitations.

The boy must recognize his five loaves and two fish will feed only a few people, but he willingly brings what he has to Jesus. It proves enough.

● **How has the pandemic affected the value you place on Sunday Eucharist?**

● **When have you experienced a little help making a big difference?**

● **When have children called you to action and hope again?**

The 5,000 are following Jesus because of the signs he has worked. His first sign is changing water to wine at a wedding in Cana. His second is healing the son of a royal official. Jesus challenges the official, "Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe." Indeed the official does believe and his son is saved (John 4.50). Then Jesus heals a man ill and paralyzed for 38



years (John 5.1-9). The narrative has built up reasons for people to flock to Jesus.

The crowd finds plenty of grass for everyone to sit on and plenty of food to satisfy their hungers. Five thousand people make for less than intimate table sharing, yet as the host at this gathering, Jesus creates the common ground for forming new relationships. The scene suggests the universality of the Body of Christ, the community Jesus continues to feed down the centuries and throughout the world.

The twelve baskets of leftovers also hint at universality. It's the number of all the tribes of Israel. Twelve is a number symbolizing abundance. The food Jesus gives increases in being given. The crowd has more food left over than there was to start. It works like love.

After the feeding, the crowd wants to make Jesus their king. They know because they have eaten that he has the power to satisfy their hungers. They misunderstand his power.

The crowd tries to force him into a power role that does not fit who Jesus is. He will not satisfy their hunger for a victorious, all-providing king.

At this point Jesus disappears. He goes back up the mountain where he fled at the beginning of the story. The crowd doesn't find him there.

● **What hungers do you feel today? What helps nourish them?**

● **What hunger does sharing Sunday Eucharist satisfy for you?**



Faith makes enough of a little.

Sunday's first reading about the prophet Elisha closely parallels the gospel. The story contrasts a servant's doubts that God will provide with the prophet's faith there will be enough.

When humans trust God to work with and through whatever they are and have, the results

DO SOMETHING

CHARITY

JUSTICE

● Harvest berries and vegetables from your garden, or visit a farmers' market to buy locally-grown produce. Invite friends and family members to make a dish celebrating the fruits of the earth you gathered. Share extra produce with a food shelf.

● Look into Heifer International, an organization which helps people in our country and all over the world become self-sufficient by raising their own food and selling the extra at market. Its website—heifer.org—makes the mission clear and attractive.

are amazing! Not only is there enough, but as God's word promises, there are leftovers. "God is indeed near to all who call," as the psalm verse for Sunday proclaims.

Elisha feeds one hundred.

A man came from Baal-shalishah, bringing food from the first fruits to the man of God: twenty loaves of barley and fresh ears of grain in his sack.

Elisha said, "Give it to the people and let them eat."

But his servant said, "How can I set this before a hundred people?"

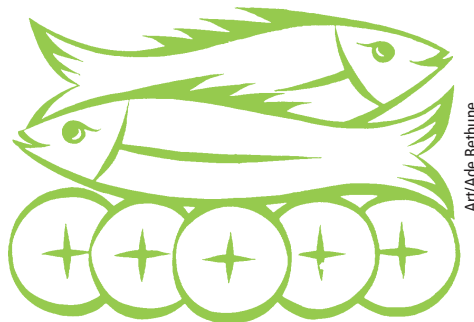
So Elisha repeated, "Give it to the people and let them eat, for thus says the Holy One, 'They shall eat and have some left.'"

The servant set the food before the people, they ate, and had some left, according to the word of the Holy One.

2 Kings 4:42-44

Prophetic people insist that God can take a little and convert it into more than we can hope or dream or imagine. A relatively unknown holy woman, Caryll Houselander, started a weekly soup kitchen called "Loaves and Fishes" in London, England, during the aftermath of World War I. She and her friends opened a modest kitchen that represented all that they could beg, borrow, and buy. Amazingly, the goodness of other people added to what the friends could provide and they fed multitudes.

Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin initiated the Catholic Worker houses on a similar faith assumption. The growing lines of depression-oppressed



Art/Ade Bethune

people drew them to set the loaves and fishes they had before the many who hungered.

God does not desire the people to remain hungry. Regardless of the multiple shapes that hunger can take, "the hand of God feeds us." If we, or those we know, have hungers that remain unsatisfied, whose problem is it?

Sunday's scripture readings suggest that the fault does not lie with God's power, for faith assures us that the psalm is right, "God is near to all who call on God in truth." If God insists, as Jesus and Elisha do, that the people eat, but hungers persist, where is the problem? Oh, oh!!!

● What feeding has God done through you?

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PRAY

LEADER: We are people who know we are hungry.

ALL: Feed us and help us nourish one another.

LEADER: The eyes of all look hopefully to you, life-giving God, to give them food in due season.

ALL: You open your hand and satisfy the desire of every living thing.

LEADER: Our God is near to all who call out with sincere hearts.

ALL: Feed us and preserve us as one Body in one Spirit, in communion with the one God, one faith, and all the baptized through whom one God works, over all and in all. Amen.

SING or say: "I Am the Bread of Life."

*I am the bread of life.
You who come to me
shall not hunger.
You who believe in me
shall not thirst.
No one can come to me
unless the Father beckons.
And I will raise you up.
And I will raise you up.
And I will raise you up
on the last day.*

LEADER: Christ among us has blessed our lives, our daily bread.

ALL: We shall eat and there will be some left over.

Break and share the bread.

LEADER: Let us go forth to lead a life worthy of the calling we have received, making every effort to preserve the unity which has the Spirit as its origin.

ALL: As the hand of God feeds us, may we go forth as broken bread to share our lives.

