

## AUGUST 2, 2020: EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Isaiah 55:1-3   Romans 8:35, 37-39   Matthew 14:13-21

It's a shame many who listen to today's well-known gospel pericope won't get the message Matthew originally intended us to get. To hear what the evangelist expected us to hear, we must point out two frequently overlooked elements in this passage.

First, this miracle, like all gospel bread miracles, is about the Eucharist. (In John 6 Jesus even institutes the Eucharist during the miracle, not at the Last Supper.) It's the only miracle narrated in all four gospels — a total of six times. The early Christian community was convinced that what happened that day had something to do with their celebrations of the breaking of bread.

Second, Jesus doesn't feed the people; his disciples do. He only insists, “Give them some food yourselves,” then blesses their small collection of bread and fish, and finally returns the paltry fare “to the disciples, who in turn gave them to the crowds.” Because of his followers' generous sharing of their food, “all ate and were satisfied.”

When Scripture scholars talk about a biblical Eucharist, they certainly don't have today's celebration of “Mass” in mind: an event in which a liturgically attired and officially ordained man enters a specially constructed “sacred space,” and recites specific words over elements of bread and wine, transforming them into Jesus' body and blood.

We know from I Corinthians 11 that when Jesus' first followers gathered to celebrate the Lord's Supper they simply shared a potluck meal during which their recognition of themselves and one another as the body of Christ also caused them to recognize the risen Jesus in the bread and wine they consumed. This recognition only happened because they died enough to become one with everyone around them. They literally gave themselves on various levels to one another.

The heart of a biblical Eucharist doesn't lie in special words or special people reciting them, it revolves around a special giving of themselves by all who participate in this exceptional meal. That's why today's gospel Jesus is forced to overcome his disciples' logical complaint that they don't have enough to share.

That leads us to the next question: what do any of us have that we can share with others during the Lord's Supper? The vast majority of us aren't professional theologians, musicians or counselors, and since we no longer participate in a potluck meal, we can't even share our favorite recipes.

It would be helpful if our parishes at least had dialogue homilies and open Prayers of the Faithful. But no liturgical regulation can stop us from being totally open to all around us. Those who receive such a personal, generous gift know what Deutero-Isaiah is talking about when he quotes Yahweh encouraging those “who are thirsty to come to the water! You who have no money, come, receive grain and eat!” There's no charge. We have no idea what basic needs we fulfill when we simply give ourselves enough to make all feel welcome.

No wonder Paul is so convinced that nothing can separate us from the love of Christ. He knew nothing can separate us from the love of the Body of Christ, present and giving during the Eucharist.

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## AUGUST 9<sup>TH</sup>, 2020: NINETEENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

I Kings 19:9a, 11-13a    Romans 9:1-5    Matthew 14:22-33

Today's three readings are quite disturbing. They surface things many of us would rather keep under a theological lock and key. Perhaps some of the stuff we learned in catechism class "ain't necessarily so."

The "thing" in our first reading occurs immediately after today's liturgical passage. It's consoling to us believers to know that Yahweh speaks to Elijah not in wind, an earthquake, and fire, but in "a tiny whispering breeze." Couldn't be a more pleasant encounter. Yet what God asks the prophet in this specific situation is more than unsettling. He/she demands to know, "What are you doing here?"

Elijah is running away from Jezebel, the Israelite Queen who's put a contract out on his life. Thankfully, Yahweh helped him escape to Mount Horeb (Sinai) by providing him with sufficient food and water to trek 40 days and 40 nights through the wilderness. But now God abruptly informs him he shouldn't be there. He insists the prophet return to Israel and forcibly confront this idolatrous queen. After giving him the means to get to Horeb, Yahweh insists he's in the wrong place!

Did something parallel ever happen to you? Is it possible for God to change God's mind?

We know from today's Romans pericope that something parallel did happen to Paul of Tarsus. He's spent a lifetime trying to be as good a Jew as he could possibly be, adhering to all the Mosaic 613 laws. Yet through his experience of the risen Jesus, he's discovered God wants him to go beyond those regulations and become another Christ. Justification – doing what God wants you to do - has taken on a completely new meaning for this Apostle to the Gentiles.

Yet Paul claims he would be willing to give up all those saving insights and be "cut off from Christ" if only his fellow Jews would embrace this unexpected path to justification. With countless acts of anti-Semitism in our not too distant Christian past, it's difficult for us to appreciate Paul's frame of mind. That's simply not how a lot of us were "brought up." To say our faith springs from and revolves around Judaism is an understatement. But it's something few of us have ever been encouraged to explore.

Neither have we Catholics been encouraged to explore Peter's sinking in today's gospel pericope. Accustomed to applying just one biblical verse to the leader of the Twelve – Matthew 16:18: "You're the rock and on this rock I'm going to build my church!" – we conveniently forget the other things said to Peter in the Christian Scriptures. Things like, "Get behind me, Satan!" or today's statement, "O you of little faith."

Our evangelists had no idea this poor, probably illiterate fisherman would one day morph into the first Roman Catholic infallible pope. As I mentioned above, he functions as the gospel leader of the Twelve. But no one originally thought of that group as the church's first bishops. They were simply a classic symbol of the historical Jesus' plan to offer his reform to all of Israel's twelve tribes. For this Galilean carpenter, the tribe of Naphtali was just as important as the tribe of Judah. And he demonstrated that conviction by traveling around with the Twelve: a group meant to bring back memories of the twelve sons of Jacob.

Matthew believes anyone – even Peter – can eventually stop focusing on Jesus and make other things a priority. When that happens, the person begins to sink, overwhelmed by those other things.

It's interesting today that we once again have a pope – Francis - who personally focuses on Jesus, and challenges us to do the same. No wonder he faces opposition. We're a little out of practice. Many of us simply haven't done that for a while.

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