

Weekly Reflections on the Sunday Gospel

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EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Our Scripture passage for this Sunday comes from the Gospel of Matthew 14:13–21. This is the famous scene of the multiplication of the loaves and fishes, and it was obviously an important teaching in the life of the early Church because there are six similar accounts in the four Gospels (Mt 14:13–21, Mk 6:35–44, Lk 9:12–17, Jn 6:1–15, Mt 15:32–39 and Mk 8:1–10). Indeed, this passage has much to say about the life of discipleship and how we cooperate with the Lord's grace so as to meet the overwhelming needs we face each day.

When reading any biblical text, it is always important to place it in the context of what preceded it. If we look at the verses immediately before this passage, we read the account of the beheading of John the Baptist at Herod's banquet. This context tells us that the banquet of Jesus (feeding of the 5,000) is meant to be understood in stark contrast to the banquet of Herod. Herod's banquet was a manifestation of arrogance, conspiracy, and murder. Jesus' banquet was a manifestation of healing, faithful obedience, and caring for others through the sharing of food. What dramatically different experiences! Indeed, the Christian banquet of the Eucharist, of which the multiplication of the loaves and the fishes is a foreshadowing, is always meant to be a counter-cultural sign of the Kingdom in the midst of the world. When we come to Mass, we do not seek to replicate the experience of secular society (egoism, materialism, consumerism, and so forth) but to replace it with the Christian experience of the Kingdom (communion, fraternal caring, surrender to God's grace, and so on). Instead of wanting the Church to be like the world, we should want the world to be like the Church.

*How does the Church today witness the counter-cultural values of the Kingdom of God?
What influences or attitudes of secular society can infiltrate and negatively affect our celebration of the Mass?
What situations exist in the world today, which are desperately lacking a Christian response, and what should be that response?*

Notice also how Jesus and the disciples respond differently to the needs of the crowds. When the crowds approach Jesus with the burden of their suffering, Jesus responds by helping (healing) them and so they remain close to him. When Jesus meets people in need, He establishes communion with them. The disciples, on the other hand, wanted to send the crowd away and let them care for themselves. Our Lord corrects the disciples' errant desire and by caring for the crowds Himself is offering us a lesson in discipleship. This is one of the first lessons of this passage, and it invites us to reflect on how we respond to those in need around us. Jesus saw people in need as opportunities for ministry; the disciples saw people in need as burdens to be avoided and dismissed. The Acts of the Apostles teaches us that charitable outreach for those in need was a distinguishing quality of the early Church (cf. the relief efforts in Acts 4:32–37, 6:1–6, and 11:27–30). The first lesson of this passage, then, is that disciples should welcome those who come to them regardless of their need and not turn them away. For the Church to reflect the hospitality of Jesus, we must learn to see the needs of others as opportunities for our ministry rather than burdens to be avoided or dismissed. Saint Paul teaches that we are all one in Christ (Gal 3:28) and that the sufferings of one become the sufferings of all, just as the blessings and joys of one become the blessings and joys of all (1 Cor 12:26).

How can we be tempted today to turn away those in need because we see them as burdens rather than as opportunities for ministry?

How can we be tempted to rely on our own limited resources rather than faithfully trust in God's eternal greatness working through us?

What are the common responses we experience when we see others in need?

Who has reached out and freely chosen to establish communion with you in your moment of need?

Next, the disciples present their small, inadequate ability to satisfy the crowd's hunger. They only have five loaves and two fishes. Had the disciples tried to feed the crowd with their own resources, that is separate from Jesus' action, then they would have been able to feed only five people. When they offer their meager, inadequate, and limited resources to Jesus, our Lord can do great things with them. Remember the expression: "The great temptation is to do nothing because we can only do a little." Don't give in to that temptation! When we offer to the Lord whatever small capability we have, God can do great things with it. The problem is that we oftentimes don't offer the Lord much to work with because we feel inadequate. This passage makes it clear that a life of discipleship is not focused on what we can do on our own but rather on what God can do with the life we offer Him. In her Nobel Prize lecture, Mother Teresa said, "If we could only remember that God loves us, and I have an opportunity to love others as He loves me, not in big things, but in small things with great love, then Norway becomes a nest of love..."^[1] God wants us to be His co-workers in ministry. God wants to act in and through us as His instruments. The Lord is always the source of a disciple's success, but the Lord works through the human resources we offer Him. The disciples needed to better understand that they are only instruments of God but not the source of God's gifts. The ministry of the Church depends upon God and is not defined or limited by the resources we muster. When disciples understand themselves as instruments rather than origins of all good gifts, then disciples will become more generous towards others and more trusting of God's providential grace. What God can do through us is infinitely greater than what we can do by ourselves.

When have you been presented with a need that you felt totally inadequate to fulfill?

How do you identify with the disciples who present the small gifts they have and Jesus does great things nonetheless?

When have you seen someone's simple efforts grow to have a huge impact?

In the celebration of the Mass, the moment of the Offertory (when the bread and wine are brought forward to the altar) is meant to be the moment when we prayerfully offer to the Lord our lives (symbolized by bread and wine) to be transformed so that we can become His presence in the world (just as the bread and wine become His presence, Body and Blood, in the Eucharist). What do you think God would do with your life this week if you really offered Him your heart, mind, soul, and strength?

How can a faith community fall into the trap of believing that the effectiveness of their ministry relies only on their physical resources rather than on the Lord?

Finally, we reflect on the interesting and often misunderstood statement of Jesus when He says, "Bring them here to me" in Matthew 14:18. This statement immediately follows the disciples' summary of their limited resources, so it is easy to presume that Jesus is speaking about the loaves and fishes when He says, "bring them here to me". However, the very next statement that follows our Lord's statement says that Jesus ordered the crowd to be seated on the grass. This context has led some Scripture scholars to interpret the phrase "bring them here to me" to refer to the crowd rather than the loaves and fishes. While this point may seem insignificant at first, it is really a rather profound dynamic of discipleship in Matthew's Gospel. Discipleship is first and foremost based on the encounter with Jesus. Our Lord calls people to Himself and asks His disciples to bring others to Him. Jesus can effect great changes in people's

^[1] Mother Teresa, "Nobel Prize Lecture" in *Nobel Lectures*, Peace 1971-1980, Editor-in-Charge Tore Frängsmyr, Editor Irwin Abrams, Singapore: World Scientific Publishing Co., 1997.

lives when He meets them personally and directly. The disciples can't feed the crowds on their own, but Jesus can, and so the best thing they can do is bring the crowds to the Lord. The disciples can't heal the crowds on their own, but Jesus can, and so the best thing they can do is bring them to the Lord. This is a lesson in missionary discipleship. Instead of only telling people about Jesus, we are to bring people to Jesus. It is that personal encounter and connection that allows the Lord to work directly and intensely in people's lives. Disciples are to be intercessors and facilitators to help that encounter take place; they are not to insert themselves in the process as intermediaries who obstruct or prevent that encounter. Every time we meet someone who has spiritual hunger or spiritual need, we need to be reminded of the words of Jesus directing our efforts just as He did the efforts of the disciples in this passage: "Bring them here to me."

How can it be tempting for disciples to insert themselves in other people's faith journeys and end up becoming obstacles?

Who is someone you know who is spiritually hungry or in spiritual need, and how can you bring them to Jesus?

Who has introduced you to Jesus?

Why is the personal encounter with Jesus such an important element in authentic discipleship?

How do you foster your personal encounter with Jesus each day?

As we close this reflection, we should remember three inspiring prayers that capture this teaching on the need to offer the Lord our lives so that He can work through us.

*Take, O Lord, and receive
All my memory, understanding,
And entire will.
All that I have and call my own,
You have given it to me.
To you, Lord, I return it.
Everything is yours;
Do with it what you will.
Give me only your love and your grace.
That is enough for me.*

— *St. Ignatius of Loyola*

*Let nothing disturb you.
Let nothing frighten you.
All things pass.
God does not change.
Patience achieves everything.
Whoever has God lacks nothing.
God alone suffices.*

— *St. Teresa of Avila*

*Christ has no body on earth now
but yours;
no hand but yours;
no feet but yours;
Yours are the eyes
through which the compassion of Christ
must look out on the world.
Yours are the feet
with which He is to go about doing good. Yours are the hands
with which He is to bless His people.*

— Attributed to St. Teresa of Avila

How do these prayers challenge you in your discipleship?

What do you find attractive about praying these prayers?

How do you see each of these prayers as exemplifying the teaching of this Gospel passage?