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Seventeenth Sunday of Ordinary Time

Thomas Gumbleton | Aug. 3, 2006 The Peace Pulpit

The temptation of course on a day like this is to say we should skip the homily and just go on with the Mass, but as I suggested before, just pretend you are sitting on the shore of the lake and there is a nice breeze coming, because it's really important to try to listen deeply today to God's Word. To start with, I'm asking you a question. Do you think that that little boy was the only one among those 5,000 people who had some bread in his pocket? What do you think? He would be the only one? Well, think about it, and I'll come back to it in a minute, but before, we really need to try to understand what is happening in this Gospel lesson.

It's not just a story about a great miracle that Jesus performed. In fact, this is one of the incidents in the Gospels that is repeated, actually six times -- two times in Matthew and Mark and one time in Luke and John, so six all together. It was a very important event, but not about what happened, but about who Jesus is. That's what we discover if we listen deeply to this message today.

Probably as you're listening it's difficult to pick things like this up, but first of all notice that Jesus is presented as a prophet. The people who read this Gospel when it was first written would have seen that right away. Jesus went up on the hill and sat down. That would remind them of Moses who sat down on the hill of Sinai and presented the Torah to the people. Jesus was the successor of Moses. And then what he did with the bread and the fish, they would have remembered that story about a person like Elisha. He was a great prophet in the Jewish tradition, a fantastic prophet that was remembered by everybody. He had worked that great miracle of feeding 100 people with 20 loaves of bread. Well, look at Jesus. Not a 100 people with 20 loaves of bread, but thousands of people with five loaves. Surely he surpasses Elisha, Elijah, Moses. He is really, as the people say at the end of the Gospel, the one who is to come. This is our Messiah. And so that's the first thing to remember or to think about as we listen to this Gospel.

But then also, notice how Jesus makes it so clear that what he's doing in this event is anticipating the Last Supper. Just as Elisha was a sign that pointed to Jesus, Jesus does this feeding on the hill and makes it a sign pointing to the Holy Eucharist. He took the bread, he blessed it, he broke it, he gave it to the people. That's exactly what he did at the Last Supper. The same words. Obviously when John is putting all this down in the Gospel, he wants us to realize that what was happening there was a sign of the Holy Eucharist, the Last Supper. We won't pursue this further, but we know that the banquet of the Last Supper is a sign of the everlasting banquet in heaven.

The Last Supper was the moment when Jesus poured out himself in love for us. The bread, the wine, are gifts given that become the body and blood of Jesus poured out in love for us, given for us. In fact, in John's Gospel, this is the closest we come to an account of the Holy Eucharist. We don't have the Last Supper described in John's Gospel with an account of the Eucharist. But what does happen in John's Gospel, at the beginning of that Last Supper, the first Eucharist, was Jesus getting down on his hands and knees, washing the feet of his

disciples, symbolizing, because he says, "What I have done, I command you to do. Serve one another. Pour out yourself in love for one another."

So this incident on that hillside of the lake isn't just about a miracle, it's about Jesus. But then, as always, it is about all of us who say we follow Jesus.

The beginning of that passage from Paul's letter to the Ephesians that we read today, "I, the prisoner of Jesus, invite you to live the vocation you have received. Follow Jesus." OK then, how do we do that? As we listen to this Gospel lesson, we think about what Jesus did, but even more about who Jesus is.

That little boy, I imagine most of us said, "No, he wasn't the only one in the crowd that had some food. Lots of people did." But as so often happens, not many would come forward. Their attitude could easily be, "Well, I was sensible enough to bring my own, why couldn't they? And so they should just go off and buy some for themselves." In fact, that's what one of the disciples in one of the other Gospels tells Jesus: "Well send them away. They can buy food for themselves." And that might be the attitude we would have. There are not many like that little boy who come forward and say, "Look, here, this is all I have, take it. Use it for everybody." But we should be like that. Every one of us.

In the world in which we live, and I'm sure you know this, a few of us have so much. We have so much in our pockets and in our bank accounts and what have you. We have so much in a world where so many have so little -- the majority. But what's our attitude? Sometimes it might be very much like some of the people of that Gospel account: "Well, let people go work for themselves. They should be able to make it if I can make it." It's not true. The majority can't.

This week, I don't know how many of us would have seen this headline or paid attention to it. On Tuesday of this week in the newspaper there was a headline that said: "Trade talks fail over the impasse on farm tariffs, five year effort collapses, subsides at issue." Now maybe to most of us that doesn't make much sense. But you know what that means? That means that many more hundreds of millions of people are going to be pushed further into poverty because we, the rich countries -- the United States, France, and some of the other group of eight, subsidize our farmers so we undersell the farmers in poor countries and then we charge tariffs for their goods that they try to ship to here. So we force them off their land and they can't make it; they become hungry, poor people.

Now you might say, "There's nothing I can do about that." Well we can certainly call our representatives in the Congress and the Senate and say, "That's wrong!" Or we can make an effort to make sure that what we purchase is fair trade items. There is such a thing as people organizing in poor countries to get a fair benefit for what they produce, and fair trade products are sold in our country, but we have to look around and we have to be interested, we have to care. We have to be that little boy and say, "I'll do what I can."

Another quick example, and this is one that's close to us, because we have our twin parish in Haiti, but just recently I read this summary of "Haiti At A Glance." Seventy-five to 80 percent of Haiti's 8.3 million people live on less that $2.00 a day. Seventy-five to 80 percent! But if you look more deeply, the poorest half of the country survives on average on $0.44 a day. The purchasing power of the U.S. dollar -- $0.44 a day. They're desperately poor; they're our brothers and sisters in our twin parish, and throughout Haiti. Half of the population has no access to safe drinking water. Life expectancy at birth is between 49 and 51 years. Children who die at 5 years or less - 12 percent of the children in Haiti. Twelve out of every 100 kids die before age 5. Now on a hot day like this, and it's very hot in Haiti, only 10 percent of the population has electricity. No air conditioning for sure, if they can even afford it. In a 10,667 square mile territory, only 380 miles of paved road, most in terrible condition. Only 45 percent of adults are employed -- two-thirds of them in informal jobs. These are people who are desperately poor.

What can we do about that? Well, we could reach into our pockets and some of us will next Sunday when we celebrate Haiti Sunday, we raise money for our sister parish in Haiti. We can give, and we should give abundantly. Like that little boy -- take everything and give it away. Or we could also call up our Congressperson because right now in the congress there's a bill, the Haiti Debt Cancellation Resolution. It's House Resolution 888. And it's a resolution that would take Haiti's massive debt burden of $1.4 billion, which is unpayable by this tiny country, most of which is an unjust debt; it came during the 30 year period of the Duvalier dictators that we put in place and that we supported during that whole 30 years. That's when that debt was accumulated. Now the poor people of Haiti have to try to pay it off. Whatever national income they get, a huge amount of it goes to the World Bank, goes to the International Monetary Fund, goes to corporations and banks in the rich countries of the world. This resolution would eliminate that debt and give the people of Haiti a chance. How much effort would it be for any one of us to call up our Congressperson? Be a cosponsor of House Resolution 888. Relieve the people of Haiti of their debt.

These are the kinds of things that we must do as we listen to today's Scriptures. Again, remember that little boy was not alone. Lots of people had resources, but they weren't willing to use them. We are like that sometimes. We want to say, "Well, go help yourself. Go buy food for yourself. Get yourself out of your debts, out of your poverty. Or we might give just a little bit. That little boy gave everything, all that he had. Let that be our model. Jesus gives himself totally to us in this Eucharist. Let that be our model. As he said, "What I have done is an example for you that you must follow." Again, Paul says, "We are the disciples of Jesus," and he urges us, "Live up to the vocation that you have received. Be humble, kind, generous and reach out to one another in love." We must reach out to our brothers and sisters in love if we truly have understood what our Liturgy of the Word speaks to us today.

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