

17th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Thank you all for your prayers and support during my mother's final illness, death and funeral this past week. She was a beautiful woman of faith who took good care of us as kids. She grew up in the Depression Era of the 1930s, so she taught us to treasure whatever little we had. She actually expressed some repulsion about abundance. She grew suspicious of people who had too much.

Sometimes we get much more than we need, want or can use. You know this from shopping. It's hard to buy one toothbrush. You have to buy three. You can't buy one box of facial tissue. You have to buy 12. Even at restaurants, the size of portions is often much more than any one person can eat. No one wants to waste food and other products. But sometimes it is hard to know what to do with an abundance of what we have.

Perhaps when Baal-shalishah gave 20 loaves of barley bread to Elisha the prophet, he felt the same way. "How can I eat 20 loaves of bread?" Elisha had a solution for this problem. He told his servant, "Give it to the people to eat." But this created a new problem. Instead of having an abundance (too much food for one person to eat), there was a scarcity (too little food for 100 people to eat). His servant objected, but Elisha insisted, "Give it to the people to eat." The servant gave the people the loaves. They all ate, and there was still food left over. The miracle showed God's power over the forces of nature, and God's desire to feed people who have spiritual and physical hunger.

Jesus works a similar miracle in the gospel. He also uses barley bread, a detail we learn only from John. He echoes the miracle that Elisha worked in today's first reading. But Jesus' miracle was even more amazing: He had 5 barley loaves, not 20, and he fed 5,000 men, not 100 people. Other gospels point out that the number of men did not include the number of women and children, so it was probably more like feeding 25,000 people from 5 loaves and leaving behind 12 baskets of crumbs.

Sometimes we pity ourselves. We think we haven't got all the things we need to lead a happy life, but we have each received more than enough from God. We have food and drink, air and water, land and trees, flowers and birds. We have family and friends, faith and the sacraments, life and love. God has been generous to us. No matter how much air we breathe and how many friends we have, there is still plenty more left over for everyone else.

Whenever we have too much of a good thing, we face a dilemma. Do we consume more than we should? Do we waste what we cannot consume by ourselves? Or do we share so that others may also enjoy the abundance we have received?