

19th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Before my mother moved into a nursing home a few years before she died, she shared some of her fears about moving from a home of her own to a shared residence. We tried to encourage her that she would already have several friends over there and that she might enjoy eating with them instead of eating alone. She said, "Yes, but I could also end up eating with people who are not my friends." Things turned out all right, but I understand that fear, not of eating food you may not like, but eating with people you aren't sure about - at the school cafeteria, inside the office break room, or in the military. The tension may dissolve, but you never know until you try, until you taste and see.

The refrain we sang for our psalm today is one of the most popular in the lectionary: "Taste and see the goodness of the Lord." For us Catholics, it's nearly impossible to sing that without thinking of communion. But in Psalm 34, that verse pertains to something else, a situation of considerable tension. Someone needs help, but has some fears about the rescuer who comes. It's like taking out a loan or buying insurance. You know you need assistance, but you're not completely sure that the person helping you is really helping you. You can face anxiety both in your trouble and in your rescue.

The person in Psalm 34 needs the kind of rescue that comes from God. The psalm describes the presence of God this way: "The angel of the Lord is encamped around those who fear him, to rescue them." The people being rescued are in the wild, but God has set up a camp around them to get them out of danger. The people in question are those who fear the Lord - those who realize that God has more power than whatever currently threatens them, so they'd better stay on God's good side. God is encamped around those who fear him not to scare them, but to rescue them.

That's the setup. That's the verse that precedes the one we sing so often at communion: "Taste and see that the Lord is good. Blessed the [one] who seeks refuge in him." The people who fear God need this encouragement. Maybe they fear that God's power will punish them. Maybe they fear that once they sit with God, they won't like God, or they won't like what God will request. Whatever the reason, the psalm basically asks them, "What have you got to lose? You're in trouble. Try this solution. Take a little taste of God. You will find the Lord is good."

Sometimes when we experience tension, we avoid the solution that comes from God. We sometimes contrive our own solution, choosing actions that ultimately do not help, actions that may hurt ourselves and the people we love. We choose them thinking that they will medicate the pain, provide immediate comfort, or make us forget the problem we have. We think we know on our own where to find goodness.

But Psalm 34 has another idea. In times of conflict, the angel of the Lord is encamped around us, ready to help, if we would just say OK. The Lord is sitting at a table. When you look at him, you may not recognize him as your friend, as someone you would choose to eat with. But take the word of those who already sit there with him. You want a better solution than the one you came up with on your own? Taste. Taste and see. Taste and see the goodness of the Lord.