

Nowadays I get called 'sir,' when I'm in public. That always makes me feel kind of old. It used to be that when I got called 'sir,' it was followed by "We're going to have to ask you to leave."

A young business woman, flushed with success, was opening a new branch office and a friend decided to send a floral arrangement for the grand opening. When he arrived at the opening, he was appalled to find that his wreath bore the inscription: "Rest in peace." Angry, he complained to the florist. After apologizing, the florist said, "Look at it this way – somewhere a man was buried under a wreath today that said: "Good luck in your new location."

What do we learn from cows, buffaloes and elephants? It's impossible to reduce weight by eating green grass, salads, and walking.

And finally, I really don't mind getting older, but my body seems to be taking it rather badly!

Today we interrupt this B cycle's reading of Mark's gospel to focus for a few weeks on the gospel of John, interrupted on the weekend of August 15th to celebrate the Feast of the Assumption. John's gospel is difficult to preach on. It is an unusually paradoxical book. On the one hand, it typically uses a rather common place vocabulary. On the other hand, it is absolutely sublime in its theology. This paradox is especially true in this 6th chapter of John, where we have the famous 'Bread of Life' discourse that today's gospel introduces.

I'd like to take a bit more extended look at the text, for it will help in the coming weeks. We are told that "the Passover....was near." (v 4) Now almost everything in John's gospel has another meaning, and this is more than a calendar issue. When John mentions that a Jewish festival is near, Jesus regularly presents a provocative teaching that subverts a traditional understanding that was offered by the Jewish religious authorities, which often results in a confrontation. Therefore, if the Passover is imminent – a festival in which the eating of unleavened bread is a key component – John is alerting his readers to be particularly attentive to what follows.

From His vantage point on the mountain, Jesus "looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward Him" (v 5). Having now become aware of the enormous crowd, Jesus directs a question to Philip: "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?" Philip, however, is oblivious to Jesus' examination, for John informs us that "Jesus said this to test Philip" (v 6). Without reservation, Philip verbalizes what any sane person must be thinking – there is no way to obtain enough food for this many people (v 7). This brief exchange between Jesus and Philip illustrates the bleak human predicament. There are vast human needs – personified by the LARGE crowd – yet human resources are inadequate – as evidenced by Philip's response that even a sum of money equal to "200 days wages" would supply only "a LITTLE" piece of bread for each one (v 7). This is the modern day equivalent of a jumbo jet filled with passengers sharing one packet of airline pretzels. In other words, it is futile to give just a bite or two of food to each person; one might even suggest that such an act – giving hungry mouths a tiny morsel of food – borders on cruelty. In short, John has vividly portrayed the desperate human condition.

Although the preceding contrast about human need and inadequacy is quite plain, John intensifies it with a remark from Andrew, who says to Jesus, "There is a boy here who has 5 barley loaves and 2 fish." The translation is not very good. The words are actually diminutive in the Greek – it is a LITTLE boy and 2 SMALL fish. And to make the gulf between human need and insufficiency even more pronounced, Andrew asks, "But

what are they among so many people?" (9). Obviously, 5 loaves and 2 small fish are worthless tokens. Not only has Jesus tested Philip, but Andrew has also been unwittingly drawn into Jesus' examination.

Having established the impossibility of meeting the vast needs of this large crowd, Jesus instructs His disciples to do something preposterous, "Make the people RECLINE." Reclining is the word used for a feast, not a puny picnic! This is the same word John will use in his description of the Last Supper. John also comments "there was a great deal of grass in the place." (v 10) Surely this image indicates that a sufficient divine bounty will soon supply their needs, a crowd whose number exceeds that of 5000 MEN. And that means MEN, as only men would have been counted, and there would have been women and children as well – an even bigger crowd! Don't complain to me about sexism! I'm just reporting the facts!

John next reports that Jesus took the loaves, gave thanks (it is the word that we use for Eucharist) and "distributed them to those who were reclining and also *as much of the fish as they wanted.*" In short, this was no limited distribution of finite resources that were equally divided so each person received 'a little.' It was such an abundant feast that after the people "were satisfied," the disciples "filled 12 baskets" (vv 12-13); and not just a few small baskets, but 12 baskets, to symbolize the Lord's overwhelming provision for each tribe of Israel. (This whole section adapted from HOMILETICS, July 2006, p. 43-45)

OK, that was point one, the biblical background. Maybe a bit dry for many of you, but it really sets us up for what is to follow over the next few weeks. So second, our place in this. It is the LITTLE part. A LITTLE boy with LITTLE fish, and even BARLEY bread – the cheapest, for it was the bread of the poorest of the poor. All of these LITTLE things become the stuff of a miracle.

We live in a world where big is always seen as better. Bigger cars, boats, houses and salaries. But it's not that way in the spiritual life, the life of following Christ. Generally, small is better in what really matters to God. The great teacher on littleness in our tradition is Therese of Lisieux, the Little Flower. She wrote that "Small is beautiful." And "No matter how wide is the extent of our littleness, it cannot be an obstacle to God's action. On the contrary, we shall be ready for His action in proportion to our need. The greater our weakness, our poverty and misery, the more ready we are for His mercy. Hence, we ought to the more eagerly accept our littleness; for the work of divine mercy consists precisely in filling up the void....God's love is satisfied only 'when God stoops down to our nothingness and transforms that nothingness into fire.'" (Adapted from Jamart, THE COMPLETE SPIRITUAL DOCTRINE OF ST. THERESE OF LISIEUX, p. 51)

The problem is that we after big, big, big! We have big egos big jobs, and we are important and need to be paid attention to. We are successful! We are somebodies! We are from the RESEARCH TRIANGLE AREA! But most of us are spiritually pygmies, the only area where anything counts in the end. All of our pursuit of big and important and powerful and wealthy is not a help toward becoming small enough to enter the Kingdom of God. Only when our egos have been deflated and we are small enough, humble enough, to get on our knees can we finally hear the still, small, LITTLE voice of God which calls to us on a daily basis. But we are generally too busy being big and puffed up to take time or notice. The small boy with the little fish is a good reminder of how God works – and it ain't the way the world works!

Third and finally, the Eucharistic themes of this passage. From our look at the passage, we see that much more is going on here than the feeding of a hungry crowd. We are not to focus simply upon Jesus' compassion for the hungry. We are to think beyond bread to Jesus, the Bread of Life. Again, this is John's gospel, where almost nothing is as it first appears on the surface. Everything beckons us deeper and deeper into a better understanding of Jesus as the Christ, the very incarnation of God. The crowds look at Jesus and

see little more than a prophet or a wonder worker. We are being coaxed and coached to look at Jesus and see GOD.

So what about the Eucharistic themes? I always find it interesting to hear conversations about who can go to communion and who can't. Right now it rages over politicians, the Bishops are flummoxed over divorced and remarried, people worry about young children, or candidates in the catechumenate. We worry over whether people really understand what the Eucharist means – or whether or not someone is worthy. But is there anyone here who really knows what the Eucharist means? And who is worthy? If you know, you could do some of the preaching over the next few weeks. The Eucharist means everything a meal means – and then a whole lot more!

And what does a meal mean? Hospitality, refreshment, community, sharing, giving, sacrifice, love, pain, blood, forgiveness and reconciliation, and then a whole lot more! The Eucharist means all that in the name of Jesus. Such matters are too deep for words – too wonderful for mere understanding. Now I'm all for instruction, education, and careful understanding of our faith, as well as a sense of sin and right disposition. But there are limits, for these matters are too rich for our narrow ways of thinking – and judging. (adapted from Willimon, PULPIT RESOURCE, July-Sept 2006, p. 24) We need to follow the lead of Pope Francis, who reminds us that "the Eucharist is not a reward for saints but medicine for sinners" And we are ALL sinners. What does the church have us all pray before we receive the Eucharist? "Lord, I am not worthy for you to come under my roof, but only say the word, and my soul shall be healed." We don't get hear but by the grace and mercy of God.

A story to conclude. Once there was a man named John Shayo. John Shayo lived in a village at the base of the mountain where God lived. John was a good and devout man who helped the poor and needy, prayed every day, and struggled to live a good life.

But the village where John Shayo lived was a treacherous place, filled with thievery, cheating, fighting, drunkenness and discord. John Shayo decided to leave his village and make his home on the mountain where God dwelt.

It was a long, steep climb in the hot sun. Along the way John was startled to meet a bearded man making his way down the mountain. The 2 greeted each other. The traveler introduced himself as Emmanuel and said that he was going down to live in the valley below. John warned him of the dangers of his old village. Emmanuel thanked John and the 2 parted in peace.

After 3 days, John Shayo reached the summit of the mountain. He was awed by the peace and quiet of the place. But there was no God there. It was deserted. John Shayo called out "Where are you, God?"

Suddenly, a gaunt old man appeared and greeted John.

"Rest, son, from your long trip."

"But, Father, I have come to find God, the Peaceful One."

The old man replied, "You met God on your way here. He was going down to the valley to make His home among the people."

John Shayo was stunned. "That was God?"

“That was God. You see, God does not want to live here alone. He wants to be one with the human beings He created. That is the meaning of His name, Emmanuel – ‘God-is-with-us.’”

“But in the valley there are thieves and drunkards and evil men. Why does God want to live with them?”

“Because God loves them as His own. Where else should God be?”

John Shayo understood. And then John Shayo began his trip back down the mountain, and home.

In His feeding of the 5000, Jesus – EMMANUEL – creates a village of cooperation and trust. He takes one little boy’s gift and transforms that small act of generosity into a manifestation of God’s love. That is the challenge of the Gospel and the mandate of the Eucharist that is foreshadowed here: to take up the hard work of reconciliation and compassion begun by God, the God who dwells here in our own villages of Apex, Cary and Holly Springs; to imitate the humility, servanthood, LITTLENESS of Emmanuel in our efforts to bring the peace of God’s dwelling place to our own homes; to become the body and blood of Jesus that we receive at His table where all – saints and sinners – are welcomed.

Which means there is a place for me! And a place for all of you! Thanks be to God! WELCOME TO THE FEAST! AMEN! (Adapted from CONNECTIONS, July 2006, p. 4)