

Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)

Is 55:1-3

Ps 145:8-9,15-18

Rom 8:35,37-39

Mt 14:13-21

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Paul W. Galetto, O.S.A.

I have always been uncomfortable with the detail provided at the end of today's Gospel: they gathered up the fragments and they filled twelve wicker baskets full. Why? Was Jesus a poor meal planner? Did he need to have leftovers for the journey? Was he just trying to show off?

My experiences with human beings as well as St. Augustine's reflection on God's goodness have helped me develop an answer to this question. Let me explain. I don't think that Jesus intended the leftovers. I think what happened is that when he tried to feed the crowd of 5000, he ran into a lot of fussy people. I imagine that the story went something like this: Thomas (who eventually became "The Doubter" - probably because of his experience in this incident) was starting to distribute the food. He went to the first group of 50 or so seated on the hillside. When he presented them the loaves and fish, they were aghast. You see, they were a group of sea-creatures rights activists and they couldn't believe that Jesus would offer fish to eat - how unthinkable, how cruel! Because of this prejudice, they would rather starve than eat. Thomas passed to the next group. When he encountered this group of 50 or so, he just happened to run into a group of non-carbohydrate dieters. When they saw the loaves, their eyes almost popped out of their heads, but because no one of the group would make a move to go for it, they all passed and felt smug in the self-assurance that they were able to resist this "temptation." The third group that Thomas approached was much the same. They had devised some system that gave everything points or calories or values and since it was whatever day of the week it happened to be, loaves and fish were not on the menu and they had to pass. (Can we see why Thomas became the Doubter?) On and on it went until Thomas and the others had twelve wicker baskets full of leftovers.

St. Augustine tells us, "God is much more willing to give than we are to receive." There are so many blessings that God wishes to bestow upon us and yet we refuse them. Sometimes with the fervor of a die-hard activist, we approach these blessings with a prejudice and because of our jaundiced or myopic vision we fail to recognize that God wants to bless us. How can a poor person talk to me? How can an Hispanic, a White, a Black or an Asian tell me something? Or, the only place I'll get my knowledge of faith is from a Catholic! Maybe we need to broaden our vision. Maybe we need to open our eyes and ears to see and hear what God has to offer us. Remember the story of Elijah. It wasn't in the earthquake or the storm that he heard God's voice, but in the gentle breeze.

Sometimes like our no-carb friends, we put ourselves on fad diets because we have abused the blessings in front of us. If we would just approach the blessings God gives us with moderation, we wouldn't have to pay for our "sins" by temporarily eliminating what is otherwise good from our diet. Excess is our problem, not God's; God is about abundance - the willingness to give us all that we need (vs. all that we want).

Sometimes like a point-counting fiend, we value the wrong things. We choose power over service. We choose loyalty over love. We choose material wealth over the riches of humanity. We need to take the time to reassess our values. What is it that matters most to us in life. What do we love? For what (or whom) will we sacrifice? God gives us, in abundance, what we need. These are the things we should value and for which we should strive.

As we reflect on the story of the loaves and the fish, let us realize the goodness and benevolence of our God. He is much more willing to give than we are to receive.