

18 Sunday A

August 2, 2020

St. Patrick

Theme: The greater miracle—Jesus multiplying our sharing in the midst of great need

It was a deserted place—out in the middle of nowhere. The Gospel tells us that Jesus **“had compassion”** on **“the great crowd.”** Jesus tells the disciples then—and us this Sunday: **“You give the crowds something to eat.”**

The disciples brought to him what they thought was all they had: five slices of bread and two fish sticks (1)...and there were well more than 5000 folks. So, how did it happen? How did Jesus’ miracle take place? With all respect, was it *zap*—and instantly, the five bread slices became 50, then 500...then, multiplying right before their eyes. *Zap*, and it happened, extra loaves tumbling into the laps of the disciples, who distributed them to all. Surely, this was a grand miracle, and yes, it could have happened that way—*zap*—and the loaves were multiplied.

There’s another way it might have happened (and it remains faithful to the text).

Within the first three months after I became part of St. Patrick’s, at a parish dinner I happened to eat with Monica and Stephen Juma. We were able to talk at length during the meal. I learned that both of them graduated from Loyola University of Chicago. I then asked each where their home was. For Monica, it was California. Then Stephen told me that he was from Kenya. I told him that, a year before I was ordained a priest, as a deacon I served during the summer of 1973 in a small town within Kenya, telling Stephen, “It’s a very small town some three hours from Nairobi; you’ve probably never heard of it—Ahero is its name.” Then, Stephen told me that his hometown is some fifteen miles from Ahero. I was stunned. More than 8000 miles from St. Patrick’s, the two of us had a town in common in the East African nation of Kenya.

This small town of Ahero was in an area rich in malaria. It is right on the equator line and, in the summer of 1973, the scorching sun had burned the last four crops. Oh, here in Memphis there are pockets of squalid poverty. In this African town

called Ahero, however, the entire town was blanketed with a stifling poverty. The people ate at every meal a corn meal concoction called “kuon.”

“You give the crowds something to eat,” so Jesus told the disciples in the Gospel.

The parish church building was large and simply constructed—with a tin roof and open sides in order to allow ventilation to cool the assembly. On Sundays there was a huge gathering for the Mass, and the music exuded joyful praise with drums and singing. I’ll never forget the “offertory collection.” As ushers passed large woven baskets, people didn’t put in money; there was none. It was mainly a barter society back then. Instead, I witnessed people dropping into the baskets ears of corn, eggs, and fruit. It was a medley of fresh food items, and as we gave thanks at the altar of the Eucharist, around the altar were hundreds of food items the assembly had given at the “offertory” time. I wondered what would happen with all that food. In the midst of such widespread poverty—yes, the last four crops ruined by the scorching sun—I thought that, if I had a family there, I don’t think I would have been free enough to share my little food at the “offertory” time. In contrast, everybody there shared something from the little they had.

At the end of the Mass, prior to the final blessing, the pastor—Father Hans Kuntner—assisted by the equivalent of the women’s guild, invited the elderly forward. Slowly they hobbled forward and received the foodstuffs gathered at the offertory collection. No social security at that time in this African town, the seniors of the parish received what they needed for the week.

So, how *did* the first multiplication of the loaves and fish take place? Actually we don’t know. It could have been a “zap” miracle. Perhaps, though, hidden under the cloaks of all those people huddled together in a deserted place—“enough for their own use”—the vast majority were hesitant to share their food. And then, with Jesus’ prayer of thanksgiving and the power of his Word, there was the miracle of the changing of selfish people into generous sharers at the very presence of Jesus (2).

They were transformed—and more than enough shared.

This past Friday, some 400 cars drove by our mobile food pantry in the parking lot next door to the east. Parishioners and Rotary Club members volunteered and

there was a sharing of a lot of food to people clearly needing support in this time of crisis.

Soon after Pope Francis became Bishop of Rome, he called us to a deeper sharing. He addressed these bold words to financial experts and political leaders—and no doubt, to all of us in light of Jesus’ multiplication of the loaves and fishes. Pope Francis quoted from the early 5th century bishop, St. John Chrysostom, who put it bluntly: **“Not to share one’s wealth with the poor is to steal from them and to take away their livelihood. It is not our own goods which we hold, but theirs”** (3).

“You give the crowds something to eat,” so Jesus tell us in the midst of our devastating crisis. May we be transformed—and, more than enough shared.

(1) That image is taken from Rev. Grace Imathiu, “A Picnic on the Mountainside,” July 30, 2000, from “The Protestant Hour” www.deaconsil.com.

(2) See William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, volume two—revised edition (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975), pg. 103.

(3) St. John Chrysostom, *De Lazaro Concio*, II, 6: PG 48, 992D; quoted by Pope Francis in his Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium* (November 24, 2013). #57.

General Intercessions

August 2, 2020

18th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Make us, your Church, a strong witness to the love Christ showed to those who are vulnerable and in need; we pray to you, O Lord—

Inspire us to love the elderly, care for the young, and reach out to the sick; we pray to you, O Lord—

Strengthen us to live in gratitude, to take only what we need, and to share our gifts with the poor; we pray to you, O Lord—

In the midst of the pandemic, give safety and renewed dedication to medical caregivers and first responders; give courage to leaders; give wisdom to researchers working on a vaccine; and give hope to us all; we pray to you, O Lord—

Show the light of your face to all who have died, especially Dr. Steve Montgomery, and all those who have died from Covid-19; we pray to you, O Lord—

