

## Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle A

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**Scriptures:** Isaiah 55: 1-3; Psalm 145: 8-9, 15-18; Romans 8: 35-39; Matthew 14: 13-21

### EXEGESIS

I used a number of resources in assembling the exegesis for this Gospel. Most significantly, I made frequent and repeated reference to: extensive materials compiled and written by Richard Niell Donovan of [www.sermonwriter.com](http://www.sermonwriter.com) (Dick employs an extensive list of scholars and writers in the development of his exegesis), commentary written by Fr. Kenneth Morman, S.S.L., scripture scholar and Dean of Seminary Students at the Athenaeum of Ohio-Mount St. Mary's Seminary, and the reflections of Fr. Jude Siciliano, OP, in his weekly publication of *First Impressions*. I would like to express my gratitude to each of these individuals for their extensive work and valuable contribution to this *Homily Help*.

This is the only miracle recorded in all four Gospels, a fact that speaks loudly of its importance to the early church. The Feeding of the Four Thousand is recorded in Matthew 15:32-39 and Mark 8:1-10. All six accounts "appear to be a variant form of the same tradition" (Johnson, 429—Sermonwriter).

***Now when Jesus heard of the death of John the Baptist, he withdrew in a boat to a deserted place by himself. The crowds heard of this and followed him on foot from their towns. When he disembarked and saw the vast crowd, his heart was moved with pity for them, and he cured their sick.***

Matthew does not spell out the reason for Jesus' withdrawal. Scholars indicate that the reason might have been fear in response to perceived danger. Having had John the Baptist beheaded, Herod might have found it necessary to also kill Jesus. More likely, it was because Jesus was experiencing grief at the death of John. Fr. Ken Morman, in his commentary on the text, suggests that there was "a context of increasingly hostile rejection of Jesus surrounding this whole section. As in 4:12, at the arrest of the Baptist, so here at his execution, Jesus withdraws, as he likewise does in 12:15 and 15:21. Meier observes that there is a certain correspondence between Matthew's picture of Jesus' repeated withdrawals until the time when he will go forth purposefully to his death and John's concept of Jesus' 'hour.'"

For certain, Jesus was seeking solitude and that time alone was quickly interrupted by the crowds. Instead of responding in anger and frustration, Jesus had compassion for them and healed their sick.

***When it was evening, the disciples approached him and said, "This is a deserted place and it is already late; dismiss the crowds so that they can go to the villages and buy food for themselves." Jesus said to them, "There is no need for them to go away; give them some food yourselves." But they said to him, "Five loaves and two fish are all that we have here."***

“Just as Jesus felt compassion for the crowds, so the disciples feel compassion. They are surely hungry themselves, and can imagine the misery that awaits the crowd unless someone takes action.” Yet their action is quite unusual—they tell Jesus to send the crowds away. It seems that “they feel a responsibility to bring him back to reality — to prompt him to act sensibly.” While they may have had genuine concern for the crowd, they were just as likely concerned for Jesus and for themselves. “A crowd can quickly become a mob if not managed properly.”

When Jesus says, “you give them something to eat,” the word, “you,” is emphatic in the Greek. “Christ did not feed the multitude without the human instrument. The bread did not come as manna from the sky, but through the work and kindness of some human hand” (Buttrick, 431—Sermonwriter).

“You give them something to eat” continues to challenge us today. How do we begin to feed the millions of starving people around the globe? The proportions of the problem seem enormous and overwhelming. It is far easier to log onto a website and enter a credit card number; it is far easier to write a check and drop it in the collection basket on certain Sundays of the year. Others will feed the hungry while we do our meager part. Our response is very much like that of the disciples—we are prone to despair and helplessness in the face of overwhelming need. Millions are hungry; countless are fighting life-threatening diseases; millions are losing their homes to foreclosure while we offer our contributions and our prayers. They are woefully inadequate.

Fr. Ken Mormon makes the observation that, “as would be expected, Matthew omits the disciples’ rather sarcastic question in Mark, ‘Are we to go and buy 200 denarii worth of bread and give it to them to eat?!’”

“The disciples respond, ‘We have nothing here, nothing but five loaves and two fish.’ They emphasize not what they have, but what they haven’t. They see not possibilities, but problems. Their assessment is right on the mark. The disciples have five loaves and two fish — seven items — enough for a family — but the crowd spreads to the horizon. ‘Send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food.’” They turn to Jesus and want him to act; to solve the problem.

Jude Siciliano, OP, in his “First Impressions” reflections on this Gospel, suggests that, “If I were Jesus, upon seeing all those hungry people staring at me and realizing how little there was to feed them, I would have been disappointed. And if I were one of the overworked and dismayed disciples, I too would have suggested that he ‘dismiss the crowd so that they can go to the villages and buy food for themselves.’ Makes perfect sense. I would have felt particularly frustrated with him when he retorted, ‘...give them some food yourselves.’”

“The disciples are overwhelmed by what they see and the seeming insufficient resources they have . . . The disciples have the food. Was it their own food for the trip? Is Jesus asking them to share out of their supplies? Is he asking them to risk it all, to take a chance at extravagant generosity? And they do . . . the change in the disciples, who now have learned that whatever they have, it will be more than enough in collaboration with Christ?” (Siciliano)

***Then he said, "Bring them here to me," and he ordered them to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, looking up to heaven, he said the blessing, broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples, who in turn gave them to the disciples, who in turn gave them to the crowds. They all ate and were satisfied, and they picked up the fragments left over—twelve wicker baskets full. Those who ate were about five thousand men, not counting women and children.***

In the disciples' hands, five loaves and two fish are not much, but there are other hands here — Jesus' hands. Jesus takes action once the disciples bring him the five loaves and two fish. He does more than share the crowd's pain — he feeds them."

Fr. Morman reminds us that "Matthew accentuates the disciples' role as the mediators of Jesus' gifts to the people."

Fr. Ken Morman also points out that, "four out of the five 'Eucharistic verbs' in proper sequence, omitting here only, as necessary, the 'saying' of the words of institution. In Matthew, as in the other Synoptics, there is added here in the story of the multiplication of loaves and fish an additional verb, Jesus' 'looking up' to heaven — which . . . then appears to have been transferred back into the Last Supper scene in Eucharistic Prayer II! Like Luke, Matthew ignores the fish after the prayer of blessing (all the commentators want us to remember that in Jewish practice the food is not blessed, God is blessed for the food), showing that the Eucharistic parallels are what are uppermost in view."

The disciples distribute the bread, and "all ate and were filled." This is the first indication that anything special has happened. "The statement of the miracle is really found...in the observation that...'everyone ate and was full.' The last verb (*xortazein*) has the nuance of being completely satisfied; it has already been used with clearly eschatological associations in 5:6. The miracle in this sense anticipates the messianic age in which the hungry are to be fed (cf. Luke 1:53; 6:21). Messianic blessing also appears to be intended in the overabundance of food" (Hagner—Sermonwriter).

"The twelve baskets of leftover food, like the twelve disciples themselves, probably symbolize the twelve tribes of Israel, suggesting provisions for all of Israel" (Gardner, 228). In the manna miracle, people were not permitted to keep leftovers, but Jesus, greater than Moses, has the disciples gather twelve baskets of food after they have eaten their fill.

"The Eucharistic character of the feast is evident in the verbs. Jesus took, blessed, broke and gave. 'Strikingly, it is only the loaves (and not the fish) that are specifically given to the disciples for distribution. The orderly arrangement of the people, the prayer of invocation and the blessing, the liturgical act of breaking the bread, the immediate parallel to the death of John the Baptist — all are unmistakable clues that point to the celebration of the Lord's Supper'" (Brueggemann, 433—Sermonwriter).

There are, to be sure, parallels with the feeding of Israel with manna in the wilderness. "Jewish tradition had come to believe that the Messiah would repeat this miracle of abundant provision of food on an even grander scale.... Again we see evidence that

Jesus is creating a new Israel out of those who will follow him and foreshadowing the messianic banquet. He must therefore be the Messiah" (Blomberg—Sermonwriter).

Fr. Ken Mormon indicates that unlike Mark, "who had simply spoken of the 5,000 males, Matthew heightens the effect of the number by drawing attention to the uncounted women and children." For certain, a great number of people were fed that day on that deserted place.

An altogether different strategy for writing a homily on this Gospel pericope can be found in a sermon written by Amanda Rutherford May, executive director of Episcopal Community Services in San Diego, California in which she draws impactful parallels between the wilderness setting of the Gospel and the wilderness experiences that we all encounter in our lifetimes: "To be in the wilderness is to be apart. To experience the wilderness is to experience separation. It is a place stripped of amenities. It is a place forsaken . . . All of us spend time in the wilderness. Perhaps we have been homeless, addicted, or abused. Perhaps we have been depressed, despairing, in mourning. Perhaps we have felt worthless, useless, or ineffectual. Perhaps we have felt abandoned or betrayed by friends, family, or by God. But that time we spend in the wilderness is a time to be cherished, for it is a time when we come face to face with God."

In her sermon, May recounts stories of her ministry at Episcopal Community Services, an agency which provides services for the poor of San Diego and Riverside counties in southern California—"Those who come to us are physically, mentally, and spiritually in the wilderness of their lives. Some have nowhere to sleep; some have no food; some are mentally, physically, or spiritually ill. Many are addicted or abused. All are poor. Many have been separated from families and friends for years. Some are separated from God. Like the Israelites of old, they wander, looking for the Promised Land, trying to rely on God's providence, yet asking the question, 'Can God prepare a table in the wilderness?'"

## Homily

Perhaps some of you remember the movie, *Jesus of Nazareth*. It was made as a television mini-series by Franco Zeffirelli back in 1977. Many watch it year-after-year and each time it is as if they had never seen it before.

The movie's portrayal of the event in today's Gospel, the feeding of the five thousand, is quite incredible. The scene opens with large numbers of people moving towards the spot where Jesus is. We see glimpses of all these people—the sick, the lame being carried, sick children in the arms and on the backs of their parents. And so many others being pulled and lifted on stretchers – the old, the young, and the infirmed of every kind. All seem to be moving with intensity and urgency.

As the crowd approaches Jesus, there is a growing sense of quiet, even peace, but also great anticipation. And there in the center of the crowd, is Jesus, seated on the ground in what appears to be reflection and prayer with his eyes closed. Then, in a matter of just a moment, the scene shifts to the apostles and there's this look of concern and panic on their faces. What are they going to do with all these people . . .

it's getting late and there's no food. Jesus responds to them without even opening his eyes. "Feed them yourself." And they say, "How . . . there are thousands?"

Jesus' next step was bold. He ordered the crowd to sit down on the grass. Certainly this created a sense of hope and expectation that he was going to do something; that just maybe they were going to be given something to eat. He then took the five loaves and the two fish, and looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples. The disciples then gave the food to the crowd. We next see the near empty basket with the two fish at the bottom and as each person reaches into the basket another fish appears and eventually the basket is overflowing. And so it is with the barley loaves. The scene shifts to the faces of the apostles – what was once exasperation is now amazement and joy. Then there is this resounding cry from the crowd echoing in the background, "It's a miracle! It's a miracle!"

Things didn't turn out anything like Jesus expected. He had just learned about the death of John the Baptist – he was in mourning. He was trying to go off by himself, to grieve. There wasn't supposed to be a crowd – they weren't invited. But, it made little difference – wherever Jesus was, that's where they wanted to be. And so many of them were looking for healing. Jesus put aside his own pain, his own needs when he looked upon the faces of the people. He just couldn't look into the faces of human suffering and do nothing. He healed as many as he could but he was running out of daylight and no one was leaving. And the apostles wanted to do what so many of us would do in the same situation – send them away, send them home. What could they do with so many hungry people?

Sounds kind of familiar doesn't it? The homeless, the unemployed, and the mentally ill. "Send them away . . . send them anywhere but here, we can't take care of them." When we find ourselves in situations of difficulty, when the need or the problem is so great that it simply overwhelms us, we can lose sight of God's power and presence in our lives and become unaware and even unresponsive to the needs of others.

But Jesus says "No, no – don't send them away. You! You, give them something to eat! You take care of their needs!" And the disciples respond with "We have nothing here!" They emphasize not what they have, but what they don't have. They don't see possibilities, they only see problems. Just like us. We're always convinced that we have nothing to offer in the face of overwhelming need. There are never enough resources; never enough time. The problem is too big – what can we do? Millions of starving people around the globe, countless homeless in our own city, so many going hungry—we don't have enough and we have problems of our own. It is so easy to give up, so easy to despair.

Jesus says "Bring me what you have." And he took what scarce there was and he multiplied it. And, in the silent uttering of a blessing, what wasn't enough, becomes more than enough. And Matthew reports the result this way: "They all ate and were satisfied, and they picked up the fragments left over—twelve baskets full."

So, how much is enough? How much do we really have to have and . . . How much are we willing to share? In our culture, where worth and success are defined by how much we have, how much we own, answering these questions is really tough. It is one of the most difficult issues for most of us. Even with all the economic woes and what

has happened with the stock market, maybe . . . maybe we still have more than we need. It's a worrisome and even scary time for many who are unemployed and cannot find work anywhere. We all feel suddenly poorer – retirements are being postponed, many are taking part time jobs and some are even being forced to downsize their homes. But as we take a hard look at what we have, we count, more than ever, what is really important and perhaps we still find that we have a great deal. Perhaps we still find we have some to share.

When we think we don't have enough, when we count only five loaves and two fish, Jesus looks through our eyes and tells us to "Bring what gifts we have; bring them here to me." He says. "I'll bless them and multiply them." Jesus shows us our giftedness even when it seems like there's not much at all. He says, "There is enough – I'll show you!" Just as he fed those thousands of people on that hillside, twenty centuries later, he feeds us. We bring what we have and bring it to the Lord. And, in return he feeds us, thousands upon thousands of hungry and needy followers. In every corner of the earth, in faith, in fear, Jesus feeds us, giving us what will truly satisfy us, his own body and blood.

### **Excellent Resources for Preaching**

Alling, Roger and David J. Schlaffer, eds. *Preaching as Prophetic Calling, Sermons That Work XII*. Harrisburg: Morehouse Publishing, 2004.

Bergant, Dianne and Richard Fragomeni. *Preaching the New Lectionary Year A*. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2001.

Buetow, Harold A. *Ode to Joy, Homily Reflections for Sundays & Holy Days, Cycle C*. NY: Alba House, 1997.

Dominican Recommended Preaching Preparation Resources:  
<http://www.domlife.org/dlc/Preaching/preachingresources.htm>

Donovan, Richard Niell. *Sermonwriter, Resources for Lectionary Preaching*,  
[www.sermonwriter.com](http://www.sermonwriter.com) .

Pilch, John J. *The Cultural World of Jesus: Sunday by Sunday, Cycle A*. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1995.

Siciliano, Jude, OP. "First Impressions: Preaching Reflections on Liturgical Year A."  
<http://www.preacherexchange.com> .

Wallace, James A. with Robert P. Waznak and Gueric DeBona. *Lift Up Your Hearts, Homilies for the "A" Cycle*. New York: Paulist Press, 2004.