

Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Cycle B
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception – August 12, 2018
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I don't recall being invited to a lot of dinner parties when I was a child. Oh, my family went to my grandmother's home, or the homes of my uncles or occasionally to the homes of close family friends –but those weren't really dinner parties. They were just gatherings of extended family and the food was usually served in an informal style. On those rare occasions when my brother and I were expected to dress up and sit at a formal dinner table, my mother always gave us a snack before we left home. Experience had shown her, perhaps, that the hosts of such gatherings are rarely ready to serve dinner as soon as you walk in the door – and children under 12 (or most of us over 12, for that matter) are not especially patient when we are hungry. The snack was to protect mom and dad from the constant whining question – When are we going to eat? It was also a reflection of the fact that my parents were children of the Great Depression. To them, bringing a hungry child to a dinner party was just unimaginable. As I got older, I must admit that I thought that the snack idea was foolish – you are going to a dinner party to eat, after all. Why shouldn't you arrive hungry? Sitting through enough boring corporate banquets convinced me of the wisdom of the pre-dinner snack.

Unfortunately, we carry some of this thinking, some of this reluctance to show hunger, to show vulnerability into our relationship with God – and especially into our celebrations of the Eucharist. Many of us walk away from the Table of the Lord with only a fraction of the grace God wishes to bestow upon us – simply because we do not approach the Eucharistic banquet admitting that we are hungry.

In many ways, that same mentality works its way into the Scripture readings we heard today. Rather than accept the food the angel had laid before him, Elijah was ready to sit down and die. The angel had to order him to eat enough to regain his strength. And in our gospel passage, the same people who had been anxious for Jesus to repeat the multiplication of the loaves and the fish were murmuring to themselves. There is a “smugness” about them now. Just who does this Jesus think he is, they are saying to one another. They just wanted Jesus to perform another quick and easy miracle – but Jesus asks instead that they put their faith in him – that they accept *him* as the Bread of Life – and that is too much for them. It is one thing to accept free bread and free fish – in much the same way we take the bagel bite or cheese straw offered by the food vendor at Sam's or Costco. Yes, it is fine to accept a freebie, but it is something else to admit that we need that food, that we hunger for a relationship with the Father – and are willing to accept as our

bread the flesh of the one sent by the Father. It was OK for those Galileans to approach Jesus out of curiosity, but they could never lower themselves to approach him out of genuine need.

When we began our readings from the sixth chapter of John's gospel a couple of weeks ago, we were invited to reflect upon how our experience of the Eucharist, our experience of the Bread of Life would be enhanced if we came to the altar with generous and unselfish hearts – like the boy who supplied the five loaves and two fish for Jesus to multiply. Last week, we noted the need for a daily relationship with God – a relationship that goes beyond the one we have with our insurance company with whom we speak only when we want to file a claim. We cannot appreciate the magnificence of the gift of Christ's own Body and Blood unless we acknowledge and appreciate God's immense generosity in every aspect of our world and our lives. Today's readings should add to our appreciation of the Eucharist by reminding us of our hunger for an intimate connection with God and of the humility it takes to acknowledge that hunger.

Someone who approaches the altar of God with everything worked out, with all of their problems solved, and with a smugness about the world and about their brothers and sisters will miss the graced moment of communion. The person who already knows everything will never learn anything. The person who can acknowledge no need for physical or spiritual nourishment from the Eucharist will receive no nourishment at all – no matter how many times they walk up the aisle at communion. Only if we receive the Body and Blood of Christ with a real desire for a connection with God will we encounter him in anything other than a superficial way.

Our society tells us that it is wrong to appear vulnerable, to appear needy, to be hungry. We are taught to be independent and self-reliant and to look down upon those who are not. But the gospel reminds us that it is not only OK to be vulnerable before God, to need God, to hunger for him – it is vital. None of us, I dare say, have everything worked out. All of us hunger – but only some of us are humble enough to admit it. The Bread of Life will never sustain those who seek both bread and life elsewhere. But in the great gift of the Eucharist, those who are humble enough to admit that they hunger for God will be forever satisfied. Are we already full? Do we have everything all worked out? Or do we hunger for the Body and Blood of Christ?