

Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)

August 5, 2012

There are certain moments that stick with you. You might call them more-than-meets-the-eye moments or even sacramental moments. They take you through and beyond what is out there on the surface. They signal something deeper at work in the world. One of those moments happened a few years ago at Sunday Mass when I was pastor of St. Therese Parish in the Madrona neighborhood.

As the Gospel Choir was leading us in the singing of the Sanctus, a three year old wandered right up the steps to the front of the altar. He started spinning in a circle, a slow spinning, around and around and around. His mother became aware of it, and she reached out for the child. But, without interrupting his swirl, he stepped back from her and kept spinning. Around and around and around. Again his mother reached out and, again, another step back. Finally, he began to stagger. His mother's hand was there; he grabbed it, and she reeled him in, taking him up in her arms, where his head flopped onto her shoulder.

I think it's like that with God at times. We go around in circles, God is there waiting, with a hand out, ready to pull us in. But no, no thank you, I can do it by myself, so we step back, God drops back. God lets us spin, around and around and around, until we get to the point where we teeter and then we grasp the hand that has been there, waiting.

Even when it seems as if we are only going around in circles, there is movement forward or backward, depending on our choices. Such a choice faced Israel in the desert: to move ahead with God or to go back to Egypt, to slavery and oppression. Again and again the people had to make a choice: onward with God or back to a future that had no promise. At the Red Sea, when Pharaoh's army was closing in, out in the wilderness with little food or water, Israel wanted to move backward, to the bread and flesh of Egypt. At least there was food and drink there, they murmured. But God put out a hand, and in it were food and water.

Today we heard about what was on the menu: manna and quail. Sometimes God provides what comes out of the blue; at other times God uses what is at hand. Manna (which means “What is it?”) was the excretion of lice who feed on the tamarind tree. The quail were probably a flock that, after flying hard on a long journey across the sea, was just tuckered out, and the Israelites pounced on them. The story says that God called his People forward to the Promised Land and sustained them as they went. As for the Israelites, they put their gear into forward and resisted the backward pull.

With Jesus, again, a choice. I am the bread come down from heaven, he says to those no longer hungry. It’s the day after the miracle, and the memory has faded quickly. Jesus himself is the manna, the “What is it?” in whom God is doing something new. He feeds with bread but, much more, he feeds with words.

Will they trust God enough to take Jesus as the new bread come down from heaven? Will they take the hand God has reached out to them in the shape of this man from Nazareth? Some do; many do not.

How about us? How are we doing these days? How are we doing as a community, as individuals? What direction are we moving in? Around and around? Backward? Full speed ahead? How are we moving as a country, as a church, as a parish? Do we move into the future with faith, feeding on the words and bread of Jesus?

Children are a precious part of our community of faith. They’re always welcome at Christ Our Hope. What will be our legacy to them? What kind of country are we leaving for them? What kind of church are we leaving them? What kind of world are we leaving them? Scary questions, and sometimes even more scary answers. But remember that mother standing off to the side, hand ready to reach out, to catch another hand... reaching out.

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