

Reflection for 2020 Assembly Opening Ritual

by Sr. Michele Bisbey

Feeding the Five Thousand

13 Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. 14 When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. 15 When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves." 16 Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." 17 They replied, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." 18 And he said, "Bring them here to me." 19 Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. 20 And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. 21 And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

As we gather together this morning
for the opening ritual of our annual assembly
many, if not most of the components,
are strange and unfamiliar to us from previous community assemblies.

Gratefully, some are quite familiar.

We have the symbols of bread and wine—
eucharistic gifts more cherished this year than ever before.

We have salt—
reminiscent of last year's
commissioning injunction:
"Called to be earth's salt
Passionate life in a speck
Still, more than enough"

Just a bit of salt,
even a speck
is sufficient,
is enough.

We have music
and liturgical dance
and the words of Sacred Scripture.

The Gospel passage Bernie just read
echoes Margie's reading
from the book of Kings.
We've heard the story many times.

It's told at least once in every single gospel—
and in some gospels twice.
So it must be very important,
even central to Jesus' mission and ministry.

If we were to compare the accounts
we would note that the details vary—
the size of the crowd,
the number of loaves,
who initially shares
who distributes

Different versions of the same event,
allow for differing interpretative meanings
due to differing perspectives
and the differing needs of the receiving communities.

In the midst of the slight variations
there is one constant,
one recurring
one essential truth—
there is enough—
more than enough
in what God provides
when sustenance is shared.

Previously when we've reflected on these texts
we've noted how familiar the situation was—
a needy crowd
and ourselves as ministers with too few resources.
We've suggested an interpretation
sometimes dismissed as "merely a nice thought"
that perhaps the source of the abundance
was everyone sharing their own limited resources,
following the example of Jesus and his disciples.

Perhaps, today in our #pandemic reflecting on the Gospel story
we might consider a different role
for ourselves and a different interpretation.
Perhaps, today we are not the disciples
offering our meager resources
and sharing what has been blessed with those in need.

Perhaps, today we are among the hungry in the crowd
needing to be nurtured
longing to be ministered to
burdened by age, ill health,

burdened by responsibility, sadness,
burdened by fear, fatigue,
our isolated selves may be weighed down, worried, and weary.

Perhaps we've come together today
looking for cures and healing,
hoping for renewal and rejuvenation,
maybe diversion
or maybe just swept along by the throng.

Maybe in our reflecting this year
we're looking for a miracle of global proportions
that will bring healing of all our ills—
a miracle
that will shake us free from lifestyles that have been destructive to the planet—
a miracle
that will realign our value systems so that instead of striving for self-reliance
we will choose to strive for communities that rely on each other—
a miracle
that will truly rebirth, renew, refound
the Sisters and Associates of the Marie de la Roche Province.

In the Gospel
the miracle occurred at an unlikely time and place.
It was the end of the day,
a time when darkness was about to envelop the land.
The location was desolate and remote,
a setting where anxiety might be at its height.

Significantly,
the miraculous feeding was not worked from nothing.
It was not a magical abracadabra intervention from a heavenly beyond.
It began with a modest offering of sustenance.
The disciples said,
"We have nothing but 5 loaves and two fish."
But, it wasn't just five loaves and two fish.
It wasn't nothing.
It was everything.
It was everything they had.

In his reflection on this text, Pope Francis said,
"Looking at those five loaves,
Jesus thinks: this is Providence!
From this small amount, God can make enough for everyone."
(Angelus homily at St Peter's on 2 June 2013)

The miracle source is a few giving of their very sustenance—

all that they had.
All that they had (as meager as it was)
was enough.
All 5000 men,
in addition to the uncounted women and children,
ate
and were filled.

There was enough—
There was more than enough—
12 baskets more than enough.

Perhaps
without realizing it
the actions of the disciples in response to Jesus' imperative
"You give them something to eat"
was an acknowledgement of the truth
that the loaves and fish
the disciples offered
didn't really belong to them.
Rather they belonged to the multitude.
Food belongs to the hungry,
not to the well-fed.
Nothing we have is ours by merit—it is gift,
all is gift,
all is grace.
Nothing we have is for our exclusive use—
it is gift—meant to be shared
meant for those who need it most.

Perhaps the story is told again and again
because it is primary,
because it is crucial,
because it is fundamental.

But sometimes we forget,
and when we forget
we may get caught in the scarcity myth—
We may say,
"If I share my sustenance,
I won't have enough"
We may think,
"If we give everything we have
we'll starve."

And Jesus responds,
fear not

bring it to Me—

He takes it
blesses it
breaks it
and gives it
and it is enough for us,
it is enough for all.

So going forward from today,
let's promise to remind ourselves
and each other
of the 12 overflowing baskets —
an elegant sufficiency
provided by the abundance of God's Providence.

Going forward from today
let's be confident in the belief
that there is still one familiar,
one constant,
one recurring
one essential truth—
there is enough—
more than enough
in what God provides.