



BENEDICTINE SISTERS OF CHICAGO

Reflections for 18th Sunday in Ordinary Time
August 4, 2024
Sister Virginia Jung

Exodus 16: 2-4, 12-15
Ephesians 4:17, 20-24
John 6:24-35

In today's gospel, Jesus interacts with the people who followed him across the water. They were amazed by the miracle of the loaves and fishes. They were hungry for more signs and teachings. Scripture scholars call this talk, with its intermittent question and answer sessions, the *Discourse on the Bread of Life*, and they identify the section we heard in the gospel as the introduction to the discourse.

As he wraps up his introductory material, Jesus says to the people (and to us): "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me will never hunger, and whoever believes in me will never thirst." Now, that is a mysterious enough statement that it deserves a whole 'nother section of discourse to discuss it, but that's as far as it goes in today's reading. "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me will never hunger, and whoever believes in me will never thirst.

While mysterious, it may be so overly familiar that we miss its mystery and promise. I want to concentrate on three parts of it – Jesus identifying himself as the bread of life, the word whoever (repeated twice), and the word never (also repeated two times).

All of Jesus' talk about bread reminded the people of the manna that God provided for the Israelites as they wandered and were starving in the desert. It reminded them that God is a protective, accompanying presence and a provider. Initially, the manna was also a mystery. I learned that in Hebrew, the word *manna* means something like *What is this stuff?* Not only did the mysterious bread nourish them, it calmed their fears, it reestablished their confidence in Moses, and reminded them of the value of community. Do you recall that you couldn't grab or hoard the manna, or it would go bad? To benefit from it, the people had to share the manna equitably.

As Christians, maybe the expression bread of life puts you more in mind of the Eucharist, a gift from God representing Christ's sacrificial and creative love for humankind. In the Eucharist, we are called to the table; God invites us to eat. As commentators note, this represents a big difference from the origin story of being forbidden to eat the fruit from the Tree of Life. Jesus, as the bread of life, also reminds us that we become part of the mystical Body of Christ. This is the new self that Paul writes about in the letter to the Ephesians, that participating in this we become part of the body of Christ and the family of God.

As the bread of life, Jesus promises us eternal life, a gift shared freely and unearned. When his listeners ask what they have to do, Jesus tells them that they do not have to do anything, but they have to be something, be believers. Believe in the one God sent, believe in Jesus. When we believe in Jesus and his gift of salvation, of eternal life, we will do some things though. We will become more loving, we will recognize Christ in each other and we respond accordingly, thereby building up the beloved community.

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And Jesus says this is available to whoever wants it, whoever responds to the call. We do not have to be gatekeepers. Whoever comes to Jesus, whoever believes in Jesus, receives the bread of life. Commenting on Jesus as the bread of life, the theologian Monika Hellwig notes that we do not have the advantage of knowing the living human Jesus, we need to receive that experience from each other and create it for each other. She points out that in his interactions with people, Jesus stressed kinship and affinity; he respected but did not emphasize differences. She reminds us that when we imitate Christ in this way, we experience the mystical Body of Christ.

When Jesus says that such people will never hunger and never thirst, he implies that they will always be satisfied, joyful, and Spirit-filled at a deep level. This is his promise of the resurrection and eternal life. But don't forget that participating in the Body of Christ begins with a call to holiness and unity in daily life. These are the small and the big opportunities to be loving that call to us each day.

Gregory Boyle is a Jesuit priest who directs a job training and employment program for people who want to leave gang life behind. It is called Homeboy Industries and he refers to the participants as homies. His most recent book is *The Whole Language: The Power of Extravagant Tenderness*, and it includes a chapter on death and eternal life, gifts which he wholeheartedly accepts for himself and everyone he loves. He says that belief in and awareness of the gift of eternal life brings the gift of presence, that belief in and awareness of "the resurrection locates us in the here and now", and we become able "to notice the way God notices". The men and women he serves know they are more than average susceptible to death, from the violence of the street, but even more so by substance abuse relapse or law enforcement. He recalls a homie who told him: "When I die, I'm going to take half of my heart with me and I'm gonna give the other half to you." Reflecting on this gift, Boyle writes: "This other half of his heart daily reminds me of the other world in this one. And this is the mystical take: to see wholeness. To live in the flesh of other people, to enter their bloodstream, and to be so alive there that even death is afraid of you."

I think that Gregory Boyle's words give us a beautiful, earthy, and poetic way to describe the experience of the Eucharist and Jesus as the bread of life Who invites us to a belief that allows us to become like him for each other.