

18th Sunday in Ordinary Time - August 2, 2015

Reading 1: Ex 16:2-4, 12-15

Reading 2: Eph 4:17, 20-24

Gospel: Jn 6:24-35

Homily

By: Fr. Thomas McNally

When we find poor Moses in our first reading, his efforts to lead the people of Israel were a little like trying to herd cats. He could be the best leader in the world, but they were ready to get distracted at the drop of a hat, complain about their circumstances here, decide to worship pagan gods there, chase after a laser pointer on the floor over there. And in our reading today in particular we see the people lamenting their lack of food. Which, admittedly, is a legitimate concern. Food is an important need for us, and they had every right to ask Moses to petition God to help them out.

But notice, that's not what they did. Instead, they accused him of trying to kill them and say that they would have been better off back in Egypt. As overworked slaves. Being beaten. Having their children taken from them and killed. Apparently poor Moses had to put up with more exaggeration and melodrama than a Middle School teacher. And the people forgot that this same Moses was the one who, really not long ago at all, called down fiery hail, turned the Nile River into blood, and summoned a plague of frogs and locusts. Finally, he parted the Red Sea for the people so they could escape their slavery and worship God in peace. They saw all those miracles, all the ways that God took care of their needs, then they got hungry, and decided that Moses and God were out to kill them. It feels a little like a Snickers commercial or something- "Here, People of Israel, have a Snickers." "Why?" "You're not yourself when you're hungry." They let something genuinely good- their hunger for food- distract them from something better- God's love and His desire to provide for them. Even after all the miracles, their focus was not on God.

So fast-forward to our Gospel. Last week we saw Jesus multiply the loaves and fishes. But then, like with any of His miracles, He eventually had to move on. But the people followed Him. And Jesus tells them, "You aren't here because you saw spiritual signs. You're here because I fed you." And sure enough, when they ask Him to give them a sign, as if they hadn't just seen Him multiply the loaves and fishes, they ask Him to *feed* them. Again. They're *still thinking with their stomachs!* They sound like wedding crashers moving from one party to the next looking for a free meal or something. Well, or maybe they sound a little like high school chaplains during graduation party season. Not that Fr. Jim or I have any idea what that's like. Not that I was working out in the school gym this morning still making up for those first couple weeks of summer... those delicious weeks of summer.

No, Jesus looks out at the crowd and it breaks His heart a little; you just have to imagine He did a Messianic face palm. He performed all His miracles, including the feeding of the 5000, to help the people to understand His love for them as GOD, that He *was* the Messiah, that they should find their *spiritual* food in Him. But rather than see Jesus as the Son of God, most of them saw Jesus as a free meal ticket. They let something genuinely good distract them from something better. Even after all the miracles, their focus was not on God.

And I think it's easier than we think it is to be like the people of Israel. A thought experiment, if you will. Take a moment and tally up in your head (or on paper, if you need. Just please don't write in the hymnals, though. I'll definitely hear about that one.)- Tally up the amount of time you devote to various things each week. For some of us, the biggest block of time will be sleep. Some of our parents might wonder if that's the *only* block their children will come up with. Work for many of us will take up a big piece of that pie. But setting those aside, what's left? If we're really honest with ourselves, how much time do we give to TV or Netflix or video games? How much time gets devoted to sports or theatre or other extracurriculars? ...Maybe leisure reading or personal study? ...How about family time? ...How much time do we spend with God?

Because each of those things I mentioned is genuinely good. But some are better than others. And it's all too easy for us to let something good get in the way of something better. God and our families are pretty much the most important parts of our lives. Does our tally reflect that? Or is our balance off a little bit, maybe? One of the rules that we have at LMC that I respected a lot when I got here is that there can be no school functions whatsoever on Sundays- no award ceremonies, no sporting events, no camps, no concerts, no parent-teacher conferences. Nothing. Because God gave us Sunday as a day set aside in a particular way for rest, for rejoicing in Him, and for family. And our school-aged families already have too much going on; we don't need to pull parents and children apart from each other more than they already are. We don't need to pull God and our families apart from each other more than they already are.

And I know I'll catch some flak for saying this, but I think our sports can be some of the worst offenders. Let me preface this by saying I love sports. If you hadn't figured it out over the last two college football seasons' worth of homilies, I'm a bit of a Notre Dame fan. I'm even something of a fair weather Wings fan. And I know who the Tigers are. And I respect the discipline and commitment sports take. At their best, sports are a great form of recreation and exercise, and sports teams can be schools of virtue and I think everyone should play a sport growing up. But let me be clear- in spite of all the memes and motivational posters and professional athletes who might say otherwise, sports *are not life*. *BALL* isn't life. *LIFE is life*. Sports are just one slice of that pie. And if that slice is significantly larger than those things in our life that objectively matter far more- God and family- then maybe I need to reevaluate.

And if you are one of those families where sports take up more time than God and family, or, heck, where even *driving* kids to practices and games takes up more time than God and family, please bear with me. Don't tune me out. I'm on your side, I promise. I offer my homily as calm counsel, not critical condemnation. I want to start a conversation, because I think sports can be something of a third rail in our community which people are afraid to touch. As a priest, I'm not too worried about that- if I don't dance on that rail at least a couple times a year I'm not doing my job. And I single sports out only because you probably don't have the patience for me to offer a comprehensive evaluation of all of our collective weekly schedules. But whatever our worldly focus happens to be, from sports to Sudoku, in our focus on our worldly needs, we can lose sight of our heavenly ones. We spend all weekend at sporting events and miss Mass. I don't know how many times Fr. Jim and I have heard that, even outside the confessional where I can actually talk about it up here. And when our spiritual needs aren't met, we're never going to find the peace and joy Christ desires for us. Period. We're making Jesus face palm

because we're focusing entirely on earthly food and missing out on the spiritual food He desires to give us.

But the second point is also important. Our time consumption teaches. It teaches our children, and it teaches us. If we spend all our time on travel soccer or something and never eat dinner together as a family and seldom go to Mass on Sunday, we've just taught our children that there is *nothing in life* more important than travel soccer. We may tell them differently with our words, but when words and actions differ, people tend to believe our actions.

And I wish I had an easy answer for what to do about that. Maybe we need to work to have more travel teams based here in St. Joe or Stevensville. Maybe we don't need our kids to play sports 365 days out of the year. Maybe we take a stand and inform coaches that no, we're Christians, and our kids aren't traveling to Traverse City for a Sunday tournament. We have to keep the big picture in mind. When I look back on my life with Christ twenty, thirty, fifty, seventy years down the road, in spite of the times when I've gotten distracted for a moment like a cat chasing a laser pointer, I want to be able to look at our Lord and say, "I enjoyed the good things you gave me- the sports and the food and the sunsets over Lake Michigan and my family- but in the midst of it all, my focus was on You."