

Sunday July 25, 2021

17th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Parishioner Reflection

By: Mary Bastedo

When I imagine Jesus gathering thousands of people to come and sit together on the grass, I'm reminded of wonderful summer retreats I have made. During the 1970's and 80's week-long retreats were offered every August for folks involved with the L'Arche communities across Canada. All were welcome - persons with intellectual disability, L'Arche assistants, friends, family and people simply seeking. Often there would be up to 400 people - nuns, priests and lay people - in short, the people of God. We were always so nourished - by the Gospel inspired talks, the faith-sharing and prayer in small groups, the eucharist, the mealtimes together and the evening times of prayer and celebration. We would come away inspired and renewed for whatever mission God was calling us to in the coming year.

I also participated in the World Youth Day that happened in Toronto in 2002 - with an even larger crowd gathering to hear talks, share in small groups, go to confession under the trees in a make-shift Reconciliation Park by Lake Ontario and sleep outside all night in anticipation of the Pope's final mass. These shared experiences were transformative for so many young people and those who accompanied and interacted with them. In today's Gospel account from John 6, we see how important it was for Jesus that the people gathered together. He was very solicitous that the five thousand people sit down on the grass. As they sat down, in close proximity to one another, I imagine they started to get to know each other, to relax together and experience a kind of bonding in their shared anticipation. A sense of community started to form among them, centred on Jesus and their attraction to Him.

The miracle happened when the people were gathered. Jesus took what was offered, the five barley loaves and two fish, seemingly so inadequate, yet in blessing this meagre offering, giving thanks to God and distributing it to the multitude Jesus provided for all. The meagre offering became enough for everyone, in fact more than enough - a super-abundance.

As we gradually emerge from the isolation and social-distancing of the pandemic and return to attending mass in person with a growing number of people, let us remember the importance of gathering. Even though we may feel hesitant and have found other ways to stay connected in prayer and worship, nothing can replace the transformative power of gathering in a group to praise, sing, pray and experience ourselves as a community of believers.

Over these past months we have also been very disturbed, saddened and unsettled by the discovery of unmarked graves at residential schools and the way the churches of Canada were involved in this dark chapter of our country's history. In the pain of these revelations, some people are tempted to leave the church. Again, it is so important to remember the value of gathering as a community and to move forward together on the journey of truth and reconciliation.

In my forty years of living and working in communities of L'Arche I have learned so much about the incredibly rich capacity of community to bring healing and life, especially to those who are marginalized. As a single individual what can I do to provide a home, emotional security and work opportunities for a person who lives with developmental disabilities? My resources are very limited. But as a community of L'Arche we can welcome many people and create something beautiful together. As an individual, what can I do about those who are poor in Aurora, struggling to make ends meet and emotionally isolated? Very little. But as a participant in the St. Vincent de Paul Society or the ecumenical outreach of the Welcome Table or Welcoming Arms my little offering can be multiplied so that the needs of many are met.

Jesus invites us to gather, to sit down together, to bring what we have to offer, however inadequate it may seem, to bring our questions, our pain, our desire for healing, our need to be nourished. It's an invitation to trust. Jesus can and will work miracles in our midst.