

19th Sunday in Ordinary Time - John 6:41-51

After his return from church one Sunday a small boy said, "You know what, Mom? I'm going to be a preacher when I grow up." "That's fine," said his mother, "but what made you decide to be a preacher?" "Well," said the boy thoughtfully. "Since I have to go to church every Sunday anyway, I think it would be more fun to stand up and yell than to sit still and listen."

It is often said that it is better to give than to receive, but it is usually more difficult to receive than to give. The person who gives is in charge, independent, and has the satisfaction of helping and supporting another.

The person who receives is in a different situation. The one who receives becomes indebted to the person who gives. A bond of responsibility is formed.

This is why usually in giving and receiving we try to make things mutual. We all know the experience of exchanging gifts and feeling a bit uneasy when we realize that someone has given us a gift that is much nicer than the one we bought for them.

We understand when someone is presented with a wonderful gift and says, "I can't accept this." To accept would make the person too indebted to the other. Receiving a gift changes us. It binds us in responsibility to the one who gives.

Tommy was eight years old and blind from birth. He lived in the Midwest with a loving family who was always on the lookout for a way to improve his medical condition.

When the family heard of a surgeon at Massachusetts General Hospital who had developed a new surgical technique that could help Tommy, they pooled together their resources and sent the boy and his mother to Boston.

The only thing that Tommy insisted on bringing with him was his teddy bear. It had been his companion from birth. To a boy who could not see, its presence and touch gave him security and courage. The bear remained tucked under his arm through every test and medical procedure. It even went with him into the operating room wrapped in its own sterile plastic bag.

When the bandages were removed from Tommy's eyes, it became clear that the operation had been a success. For the first time in his life Tommy was able to see light, color, his mother's face, and indeed the teddy bear that he had clutched to for so many years.

After weeks of follow-up in the hospital it was time for him to return home. When the doctor came in for the last visit, Tommy spoke up first. "Doctor," he said, "I want to pay you for helping me." He extended to the physician his teddy bear.

The doctor froze. He did not anticipate such a gift. He knew that if he accepted it, it would change him. Accepting this remarkable gift from the child would bring their relationship to a new level.

But sizing up the situation correctly, he rallied himself and graciously received what was offered. To this day you can find that bear on the tenth floor of Massachusetts General Hospital.

It is in a glass case in the corridor. Next to the bear is the business card of the surgeon. On the card is a note that reads, "This is the highest fee I ever received in exchange for professional services."

Receiving something of great value changes us. It binds us to the giver. It makes us responsible. That is why when we receive the Eucharist we should understand what has been given to us and what that gift entails.

Jesus says in today's gospel, "I am the living bread that has come down from heaven."

The Eucharist is the gift of Jesus' very self. If the gift of a teddy bear touches our hearts, how much more should the gift of the Bread of Life change our lives.

When we receive the Eucharist, it makes us **profoundly** indebted to God. It also makes us responsible to build God's kingdom, to see that God's will is done on earth.

The bread, which is the sign of the Eucharist, is also the sign of what that responsibility entails. Every piece of bread is a sign of our connectedness to the rest of humanity.

Every time we eat any piece of bread we enact our connection to the farmers who grew the wheat and harvested it, to those who made the wheat into flour and packaged it, to those who transported it, to those who marketed it, to those who took the flour and baked it.

When any piece of bread becomes Eucharist, Christ's very self, the sacrament impels us to see all of those human connections in light of the gospel.

We are connected to the people who provide us with bread, to the people who sew our clothes, to the people who provide the services of life on which we depend.

Every time we receive the Eucharist we are impelled to ask, "Are those people to whom we are connected receiving a just wage? Can they provide education for their children? Are they free to live life in liberty and in the pursuit of happiness?"

We cannot receive the Eucharist and at the same time distance ourselves from those who make the bread.

We cannot receive the Eucharist and separate ourselves from the rest of humanity.

Jesus tells us today, “Take and eat.” In a few moments we will have the freedom to step forward and receive this tremendous gift of Jesus himself.

But if we take, we must also know that we become responsible, responsible to the giver of this immeasurable gift. If we receive this bread from heaven, we become connected to the problems of this earth and to God’s determination to resolve them.

When we receive what Jesus offers, we become responsible, responsible to build the Kingdom, responsible to act for love and justice in our world.

“I am the bread of life,” Jesus says. “Take and eat.” AMEN.