



BENEDICTINE SISTERS OF CHICAGO

Reflections for 17th Sunday in Ordinary Time

July 28, 2024

Sister Susan Quaintance

2 Kgs 4:42-44

Ps 145:10-11, 15-16, 17-18

Eph 4:1-6

Jn 6:1-15

When I first looked at this gospel a couple of weeks ago, in my summer mindset, I flippantly thought, “Excellent! A story about a picnic!” I really tried to get away from that idea to get into a proper mindset to write a homily about the Eucharist, but I just couldn’t. So, I gave in. The more I thought about picnics and how much I love them, the word “joy” kept popping into my head. “Joy,” though it’s never explicitly used in the liturgy of the word today, lurks there, waiting to be found. And if that isn’t enough, these readings usually fall around my nephew Seth’s birthday. (I know this because – full disclosure – I preached a version of this homily on Seth’s 15th birthday; yesterday he turned 36!). We who know and love Seth understand that, in his severe disability, he has a million reasons not to be joyful, but he exhibits a capacity for joy unrivaled by anyone else in my life.

So, I invite you to think about joy with me for a few minutes.

There are many, many components in John’s gospel that we know from our own lives can be occasions for joy.

- There is the beauty of creation: the seashore, the mountain, and sitting in the grass.
- There are the simple, everyday things – here, bread and fish – which sustain us. There is eating until one is full – and then still having leftovers to be shared.
- There is the presence of children (remember that it was a boy who provided the seeds of this picnic. A few weeks ago, at that wedding I went to in Washington state, I was reminded of the soul-restoring power of playing with a toddler.)
- There is affection among friends. Unlike other times when I’ve thought about Jesus’s “testing” of Philip to be kind of mean-spirited, this time when I heard the gospel drama play out in my brain, Jesus’s words came out more like teasing: “Well, where are we going to buy food enough for all these people?”
- There is togetherness and solitude. The closing verses talk about the crowd trying to unravel what just happened, so there is even what can be another deep source of joy, reflection on one’s experience. Apparently, this was a really good picnic.

And before I go any further in my apology for joy, I want to say that I know that I don't always exhibit the joy I'm spouting off about. I can be just as pouty and crabby and melancholy as the next. I also know from experience that someone standing in front of me, telling me to be joyful, does nothing for my internal meter of delight. But a note in a commentary on Ephesians give me the courage to continue. Paraphrased it says that Paul's exhortation is not to tell the Christian community what to do, but to motivate them to be who they were called to be. It's a little like the carrot on the end of the proverbial stick. Remembering that we are meant for joy can help us live into it in the midst of pain or frustration or anger or woundedness or boredom.

This reminded me of a book to recommend. In the first chapter of *Inciting Joy*, Ross Gay imagines a pot luck – perhaps his version of Jesus's picnic – where everyone is invited to bring their sorrow, as well as a covered dish. He spins the story to lay the foundation for the book's thesis: that our emotions are not discreet, that joy and pain are “fundamentally tangled up,” and that recognizing that could help us be a whole lot kinder to each other and the world.

The longer I looked at these readings through the frame of joy, the more I saw it, embedded there. These readings can teach us to spot joy; they give us the hallmarks. Here are three: joy leaves room for the impossible; it encourages us to reach out; and it exists in timelessness.

Joy leaves room for the impossible. Like the disciples on the hillside, Elisha's servant couldn't believe what he was being asked to do. “How can I set this before a hundred men?” He did set those 20 loaves and fresh grain before all the men, and they were fed, and there was some left. Letting ourselves be joyful sometimes makes us look silly – but it also allows us to risk in ways that can be life-giving and nurturing.

Joy encourages us to reach out. It's not by accident that Philip and Andrew are the apostles named in this gospel passage. They are the ones who, back in the beginning of Jesus's ministry, went to get others. Andrew told his brother Simon, and Philip snagged Nathaniel. They would be the two who would go and preach to the Greek-speaking Gentiles, outside the Jewish community. A wise minister I once heard said that the miracle of this gospel isn't the multiplication of the loaves and fishes, but that there was something about Jesus that got all the people there to share what they had brought from home with the rest who hadn't been so forward-thinking.

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Joy exists in timelessness. One commentary I read talked about how this gospel looks both backward and forward. It remembers the past – not only Elisha’s miracle but the feeding of the Israelites in the desert. And it prefigures the future – both the Eucharist and the eternal banquet that is the eschatological kingdom. Think about a real moment of joy from your life. Didn’t time kind of collapse in on itself? It’s even more than “being in the moment.” It’s as if all of who and what and where we’ve been meets all of who and what and where we will be in the right now.

Joy. Risk. Extension of oneself toward the other. Timelessness. Picnics, it seems, can teach us a lot about what it means to celebrate the Eucharist together.