

19th Sunday in Ordinary Time B 2009

Robert VerEecke, S.J.

Let's begin this morning with a recap (not of the Red Sox game) but of the gospel for the past two weeks. If you're a regular at the eight a.m. mass, you have heard me preaching about the bread of life discourse from John's Gospel. Two Sundays ago, I invited you to a meditation on the feeding of the five thousand that begins this chapter in John's gospel. I invited you to think about God's desire to feed you and satisfy your hunger. Last week I asked you to think about the ways during the week that God was doing just that. I asked you what the experiences were that you had had that really nourished your spirit: experiences of friendship, love, whatever made you feel like this experience was somehow "gift." I also told you that you would hear more about God's desire to share himself with you. As the bread of life discourse continues we hear more about God's desire to feed us with the life of Jesus. So here we are together again with more to say about God's desire to feed you with his life.

First, I would ask you to think about Thanksgiving. After all it's less than four months away! What are the typical foods that are set at your table? Can you see in your imagination your Thanksgiving table? When I was growing up, in addition to the required turkey there were lots of vegetables and they were all creamed. I don't think my mother ever served a vegetable that wasn't creamed: creamed corn, creamed spinach, etc.

On Thanksgiving Day, there is a menu that is traditional (even if there are some variations on the theme): you come to expect the same foods that somehow express who you are as a family. It also somehow puts you in communion with millions of families across the US who are gathered around their tables. Somehow this meal is an expression of who we are as a people.

The Eucharist that we share is our family meal as Catholic Christians. The menu is always the same. The bread and wine that is the body and blood of Christ, that unites us, transforms us into his body. Yes, the menu never varies: that is because it is the "a-typically-typical" meal for us who believe in God's desire to feed us and nourish us with his life.

But now let me ask you to go back to your Thanksgiving table and I'll ask you: "what's in the stuffing?" (I think my favorite part of the meal is the

stuffing.) What's the stuff inside that gives flavor and body to the meal, that absorbs the juices, the essence of the food you are going to eat? What's the stuff? Stuff is a great word, isn't it? It's one of those words that we use as a catch-all? When we don't quite know what to say, how to identify, how to name, we say, "What's that stuff?"

Sound familiar? Sound like manna? What's this stuff? It's what the Israelites named the unnamable. It's what Christians saw as the bread from heaven, truly beyond comprehension. That's what we hear in the Gospel today. The claim that Jesus makes: "I am the living bread." I am the manna come down from heaven, "is unthinkable, unacceptable to those who are listening." They say, We know where you came from. We know your origins. How dare you say you are more than you appear! But Jesus challenges them as he challenges us to think out of the framework of "what you see is what you get." There is so much, much more to the reality of this bread and wine when it is transformed into God's reality, God's desire to feed and nourish us, God's desire to share the life of Jesus with us in such an intimate way. Take and eat. This is my body for you. Take and drink. This is the cup of blood poured out for you.

So this morning think of the stuff that is the Eucharist. And ask yourself: what's in this? What is in it is the love of Christ for us. The sacrifice of his life for us. The spiritual nourishment that we need to strengthen us for the journey. It is everything we need and everything we are and hope to be for all eternity.