July 29, 2018 - 17th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Homily by
Deacon Jim Olshefski

I have a confession to make! In my homily at the beginning of the month, I made a reference to a movie and promised that I was not trying to infringe upon the turf of our resident movie critic, Fr. Ken. But guess what, I'm about to make another movie reference in this homily. My most sincere apologies to Fr. Ken.

You may remember the movie of the true story of Apollo XIII, where the three astronauts: Jim Lovell played by Tom Hanks, Jack Swigert and Fred Haise, survived a service module explosion and safely returned to earth.

I was reminded of that movie, when a few weeks ago, at a Mass at Boy Scout Camp presided over by a former rector of this Cathedral, Fr. Joe Powers, I was made aware of a quote by Apollo XIII astronaut Jim Lovell that I believe is relevant to today's readings:

There are people who make things happen,
there are people who watch things happen, and
there are people who wonder what happened.
To be successful, you need to be the person who makes things happen.

In today's Gospel, I suspect that all three categories of people were among the five thousand who followed Jesus up to the mountain:

- There were those who followed Jesus solely because of the miracles that he had performed; they were the "watchers" just waiting for this miracle-worker to perform another sign, and
- There were those who simply followed the crowd "wondering" what was going on.
- And finally, there were those who made things happen; in this category, I'll place the unnamed "boy with the five barley loaves and two fish" and the apostle, Andrew brother of Peter who introduced the boy to Jesus. In John's Gospel, Andrew has already established himself as one who introduces people to Jesus; remember that he was among the first disciples and introduced his brother to Jesus.

After many years of association with Jesuit education, through my children's schooling and my personal retreats, I have found that I take solace in the Ignatian practice of imaginative prayer, where one places oneself totally within a scene from the Gospel. So, imagine yourself being among the throng following Jesus: Feel the warmth of the sun on your face, the coolness and softness of the grass as you recline as commanded by Jesus and the hunger in your stomach.

Furthermore, I ask you to imagine that you are that unnamed boy. You have five loaves and two fish, maybe for your immediate family's meal, but the apostle Andrew notices you and brings you before Jesus. What, you may think, could these insignificant loaves and fish possibly mean among a crowd of 5,000? But with childlike faith, the boy gave all he had to Jesus, not worrying about going hungry himself. He trusted; he had faith, unlike Elisha's servant in the first reading, who objected with the question "How can I set this before a
hundred people?” We hear that same attitude today in our cities: "How can we possibly feed all the homeless?"

In the Gospel, after giving thanks, Jesus distributed the loaves. Maybe Jesus invited that young boy to help him; imagine Jesus taking a loaf, breaking it in half, and asking you to go share it with the crowd seated nearby.

In the Eucharist that we celebrate together today, Jesus will distribute living bread, Himself, to us. As we gather today, not unlike the people seated around Jesus on the mountain, do we recognize that Jesus is also going to feed, to nurture, us?

Imagine, again, being that young boy as the 12 baskets are collected. Jesus comes over to you, with a huge smile, and tells you "Thanks; I couldn't have done this without you." Of course, Jesus didn't need the boy's help to perform this miracle. Instead, he used the boy's meager resources of loaves and fish so as to demonstrate the power of God.

After we are fed at today's Eucharist, Jesus invites us to go and break ourselves, to give a piece of our very hearts to others. We are urged, as St. Paul urged the Ephesians in today's second reading, "to live in a manner worthy of our call" as Christians: "With humility, gentleness, with patience," with love, for we are one body in Christ.

So, a few, final questions regarding Jim Lovell's statement:

Are you one of those who only "watch" what's going on in the world around you, or are you one who "wonders;" oblivious to what is going on? Or are you a true Christian who "makes things happen?"

Just as the young boy with the 5 barley loaves and 2 fish willingly offered all he had to Jesus, so that Jesus could feed the crowd, how will you give of yourself to help Jesus satisfy the physical and spiritual hunger afflicting those in the world around you?

I urge you to be that miracle in the world today!

Words: 828
Time: 6.0 minutes