

18th Sunday of Ordinary Time “Feed Them Yourselves”

Bishop Frank Schuster

About fifteen to twenty years ago, my parents and I made a pilgrimage to Ireland. Like so many Americans, we can trace our family tree to the Emerald Isle. For my family, one branch led us to County Kerry and another one to Ulster. The only solution was to rent a car, brave the left side of the road, wandering sheep, and dreaded roundabouts. If you don't have faith yet, just join me on one of those drives. In Ireland, one of the many themes we were tracking was the great potato famine that led to a lot of our ancestors to migrate to the United States.

The history that led up to the tragedy of the potato famine is complex. After Cromwell invaded Ireland and subjugated the mostly Catholic Irish under the mostly Protestant English, there were laws in place to encourage Catholics to convert to Protestantism. Some of them being, if you were Catholic, you couldn't go to school and be educated, and you couldn't own property. If you were lucky to get a job it would likely be in the servant class, usually in agriculture. The lands were governed by wealthy English settlers who cultivated the land to grow a variety of grains that were shipped to England. These landlords allowed their servants to grow their own food on some of the land. Potatoes were the cheapest and easiest thing to grow in Ireland, and so the potato was the chief staple of the Irish people.

When the potato blight hit the whole world, this put a higher demand for other staple foods. England relied heavily on imported grains from Ireland. Grain was not affected by the blight. During our travels in Ireland, it was interesting to me that a lot of people there say that there never was a food shortage in Ireland. Let that sink in. There was a potato shortage but not a food shortage. To be fair, most of the owners of the farms in Ireland were not complete monsters. They were overwhelmed too. The biggest problem for them was that the English government was not going to help them with their bills. If they didn't get money for their crops, they would have lost everything, beginning with their farms. The British government helped subsidize work camps to help some of the starving Irish, but these turned out to be concentration camps where families were separated apart. It was a dehumanizing failure for the most part. Landlords with consciences meanwhile spent a considerable amount of money to give starving workers on their land boat tickets to America or Canada. Many would not have imagined the horrific conditions that were waiting inside these famine ships that would result in the death of many who tried to take that voyage.

Meanwhile, for parliament in London, the situation in Ireland was far enough away to feel the need to take sufficient action. The politics of Irish liberation was still a sore subject. There was also a fair amount of religious intolerance towards Catholics and a prevailing laissez-faire attitude towards trade and commerce in general. Some gestures of good will were made. As a result of the famine, however, the population of Ireland went from 8.4 million to about 6 million. Historians estimate that about a million died from starvation or starvation related

diseases because of the famine. The rest left the country to live elsewhere. What sticks in my memory of our trip to Ireland were the words we kept hearing in the pubs about the topic of the famine, “there never was a food shortage”.

In our Gospel reading, the disciples tell Jesus that the people are hungry and that if he didn’t do something about this there was going to be real problems. Jesus then tells them, “Don’t send them away, feed them yourselves.” I don’t know about you, but with everything going on in the world today, those words sting a little. Feed them yourselves. However, we must be careful. Sometimes homilists make the mistake of explaining away the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves as Jesus’ shaming everyone to share what they brought. It is an interesting spin, but incorrect. The miracle of the multiplication of the loaves happened, it demonstrated God’s supernatural providence, and foreshadowed Jesus’ gift of himself in the Holy Eucharist. However, sometimes homilists also make the mistake of dismissing Jesus’ command to “feed them yourselves” as simply a rhetorical set up for the miracle that is about to happen. That couldn’t be more wrong either.

My friends, there are millions of people who die in our world each year from starvation and extreme poverty. You don’t need me to tell you that. What is haunting, however, is that on planet Earth, there is no food shortage. We have a compassion shortage and a commonsense shortage. So, what can we do? Blaming others isn’t going to help. Governments won’t save us either. If we want to see change, we got to be the change. You and me. We got to be the change. And when it comes to “being the change”, I am a big believer in the starfish approach. You remember the story, don’t you, of the girl walking on the beach throwing starfish back into the water? The antagonist chides her by saying, “little girl, there are so many doomed starfish, you aren’t making a difference.” She responds by picking up another starfish, throws it in the water and says, “It made a difference for that one.”

The moral of the story is: none of us can solve the world’s problems by ourselves. However, every one of us can find a starfish. There is always a local food bank we can support. There are a lot of charities that are doing great work around the world. Pick one. In our archdiocese, I recommend Catholic Community Services. They are rockstars in Grays Harbor as many of you know, especially for arranging in-home care. Globally, I recommend Catholic Relief Services. The benefit of having parishes in most communities around the world is that we know where the need is greatest and what is happening on the ground. Those are just some recommendations. There are so many good ones out there. Thinking out of the box: maybe there is an extended family member we can do something more for. Maybe there is a shut-in nearby that could use a knock on the door and a casserole. The point is: find your starfish. If one billion of our most blessed in the world helped one billion of our most impoverished, there would be no more extreme poverty.

Yes, Jesus says, feed them yourselves. Feed them yourselves! What he is challenging us to do this Sunday is to stop making excuses and become part of the miracle. Become part of the miracle! My friends, in so many ways, we can become part of the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves if after receiving the Body and Blood of our Lord at Mass today, we become what we eat.