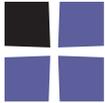


exploring

THE SUNDAY READINGS

YOUR GUIDE FOR THE MONTH OF AUGUST 2018

VOLUME 27 | NUMBER 11 | WRITTEN BY **Alice Camille**



OPENING PRAYER

Lord, you invite us to take the activity of rest as seriously as we do our work. During these summer days, help us to be gentle with ourselves, so that we seek the Sabbath rest we need to restore our bodies and our spirits. May we learn to play before you with the innocence of children. In Jesus' name we pray. *Amen.*

August 5 | LECTIONARY 113
EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

DID SOMEONE SAY FREE FOOD?

FIRST READING

EXODUS 16:2-4, 12-15

"I will now rain down bread from heaven for you."

Coffee and donuts after Mass. Cheese samples in upscale supermarkets. Free power bars at the gym. I don't even like power bars, but I take one from the basket as gleefully as if I'd won the lottery. What is it about free food that's so hard to resist?

Scientists talk about the instinct for survival that, eons ago, programmed us to say yes to food, any time, any place, even when we're full. Who knows when lean times will come, the tiger may prowl, and we'll need to sprint for our lives? If you live in a neighborhood like mine, that hasn't happened in a while. But biologically, we're always gearing for it. So: take the power bar.

Free food is rarely as free as it seems. Donuts after Mass are a lure to create community. Supermarket samples inspire attention, guilt, and sales. Fleshpots of Egypt were full, but definitely earned. Desert manna holds the nation together long enough to become the people of God. Even our Eucharist invites us to an

ever-greater surrender to a mystery that, Sunday by Sunday, claims our hearts.

» *What is the "cost" to you of partaking in the Eucharist across a lifetime?*

SECOND READING

EPHESIANS 4:17, 20-24

You must no longer live as Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds.

Folks of a certain age are familiar with the "head trip." Unlike a pharmaceutically induced trip, a head-trip is taken by means of an intellectually stimulating experience. Say you read a survey book on the history of China and as a result of conquering those 400 pages become convinced you are the world's leading expert on all things Chinese. Enjoy the ride—and also pack a parachute for when someone with more investment in Asian matters shoots you down.

It seems St. Paul was surrounded by Greco-Roman citizens who adored the life of the mind so much they placed all

their trust in so-called wisdom teaching. It was the ultimate head-trip: believing that what really matters is getting your head philosophically tuned. Our own St. Augustine was on that particular trip when he met St. Ambrose, who shot him down and won his heart to the gospels. Gospel living is not just another head-trip. It demands not only that we think a certain way, but that we do as we think. Which turns a quick trip into a lifelong pilgrimage.

» *Faith isn't a matter of thinking things are true, but that living as though they are. When has an article of belief become a way of life for you?*

GOSPEL

JOHN 6:24-35

Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life."

We perceive a pattern developing. Free food isn't quite free, even when manna rains down from heaven for all takers. Faith isn't free either, when professing a creed winds up demanding your life

in conformity with your words. Going to church is a whole lot more than free shelter from life's storms. It also implies a surrender to service. And when Jesus says, "I am the bread of life," count on this bread being both a gift and a responsibility.

Give us this bread always, the crowd around Jesus begs. Give us miracle bread

that takes away the fear of want. You and I are part of that crowd, of course, asking for something we don't fully understand. We want the bread that is really the life of Christ so we're assured of eternal life. And yes, Eucharist is that kind of guarantee—but it's not for free. Even though the ushers don't stop and take tolls from us as we approach the sanctuary for our share

of communion, Eucharist is not a free ride. Once Christ-life is in you, you are Christ for the sake of the world. Ask yourself: what did it cost Jesus to be Jesus?

» *How are you the bread of life for those around you—and those who are far off?*

August 12

LECTIONARY 116

NINETEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

WHAT'S ON YOUR PLATE?

FIRST READING

1 KINGS 19:4-8

Elijah looked and there at his head was a hearth cake and a jug of water.

Eating is harder now than ever before. It's not enough to earn money to buy the food; now you have to worry about whether or not the food will do you in. After dealing with the dismal cycle of losing and gaining the same twenty pounds for years, I made a pact with myself only to eat real food. What's real food? Something made of ingredients that are recognizable and that has real nutritional content. If I'm not actually feeding myself with this food, I reckon, why buy and ingest it?

Real food is good for you. Phony food is merely entertainment for the taste buds, and can actually do a body harm. There are, of course, other elements we take in that are harmful: negative thoughts, circular worry patterns, grudges maintained by regular rehearsals. The prophet Elijah had reached the point where negative thinking led him to abandon his mission and hope as well. An angel arrived with encouraging words, hearty bread, and water. These ingredients were enough to give Elijah strength for the path ahead.

» *What thoughts or emotions do you harbor routinely that may not be helpful?*

SECOND READING

EPHESIANS 4:30-5:2

All bitterness, fury, anger, shouting and reviling must be removed from you.

It's easy to look around at the people we know and love, and observe what aspects of their personality are doing them in. She needs to let go of that spirit of judgmentalism, we think. He needs to stop blaming other people for his problems. It's a little harder to see the plank in our own eyes: the tendency to pick irrelevant fights, the routine slide into self-pity, the paranoid edge that's always hearing criticism even where there is none.

Maybe it would be good for us to get a letter now and then from an outside authority that issues correctives to the general population: everybody, stop nursing your rage! Quit taking your loved ones for granted! Be slower to condemn, quicker to welcome! That's basically what Paul's letters invite us to do. Just like the Ephesians of old, we could use someone we trust to tell us the truth, especially when we're not going to like it. Shouldn't we all exchange malice for kindness, shouting for compassion, bitterness for forgiveness? Wouldn't we feel better if we did?

» *What is the one fault that hangs you up in relationships more than any other? How do you deal with it?*

GOSPEL

JOHN 6:41-51

"Whoever eats this bread will live forever."

Real Presence is what the Church calls the reality of Christ in our Eucharist. This isn't artificial presence, the sort we give to people we pretend to listen to, while our thoughts are light years away. It's not like the cardboard cutout of Pope Francis you can take a selfie with, while the actual pope is back in Rome. Real Presence is the same as Emmanuel, the name for Jesus that means "God with us." The living bread that came down from heaven is with us always, until the end of time.

Real Presence is real food. It's not the kind that sustains our bodies for a day, much less the sugar hit that feels good for all of thirty seconds until we're inspired to have another. Real Presence remains through eternity, which is much longer than any companionship we've ever enjoyed. If you're going to stop for a meal, this is one meal you can't afford to miss. Once a week, if not every day, you're invited to be as present to God as God desires to be present to you. Come and see.

» *Whose presence in your life has always felt especially whole and comprehensive? To whom are you most fully present?*

August 19 | LECTIONARY 119 TWENTIETH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

DUMB AND DUMBER

FIRST READING

PROVERBS 9:1-6

"Forsake foolishness that you may live; advance in the way of understanding."

It's delightful to read the parables of Wisdom: architect, hostess, and teacher. She builds a sturdy house and sets a fine table. Then she calls anyone and everyone

SECOND READING

EPHESIANS 5:15-20

Watch how you live, not as foolish persons but as wise, because the days are evil.

If I had to give a grade to most parishes I've joined, I'm afraid it would be a C minus when it comes to adult learning. Some parishes still don't utilize the

GOSPEL

JOHN 6:51-58

"How can this man give us his flesh to eat?"

Every good writer knows that one way to keep your audience involved in your story is to make them feel just a bit more clued in than the characters they're following. Viewers know, for

example, not to open the vampire's coffin at twilight: it's too late to drive the stake when he's about to awaken! We shout at the screen for the heroine not to select a path through that dark alley, or for

the hero not to turn his back on that half-opened closet door. Making the audience feel wiser than the actors gives us all an edge of superiority: how dumb that person is! How smart I would be in the same situation!

The gospel writers are good at what they do. They present us with disciples who misunderstand Jesus at every turn. Overhearing their dialogues with their teacher, we realize there really *is* such a thing as a dumb question. The crowds around Jesus are, if anything, even more clueless. When Jesus calls himself living bread, they gasp, "Does he expect us to be cannibals?" No, fellas. It's an invitation to shared life.

» ***At what points in the gospel story do you find yourself saying, "I would do better. I would be more loyal, more helpful—or less dense!"? Consider it an invitation.***

FORSAKE FOOLISHNESS, ADVANCE IN UNDERSTANDING. **WISDOM DOES NOT MINCE WORDS ABOUT THE WAY THAT LEADS TOWARD AN ENLIGHTENED FUTURE.** EDUCATION MAY BE EXPENSIVE, BUT IGNORANCE IS COSTLIER STILL.

to share in the feast. Who would turn down such a vital and significant invitation?

Too many folks, apparently. Today is World Humanitarian Day, established by the United Nations to remind us of aid workers around the world willing to step into crisis situations daily in order to do good for those in jeopardy. These are doctors and nurses, peacekeepers and emergency suppliers, risking their lives for victims of disasters and human conflicts. Yet in 2016 alone, 91 aid workers were killed, 88 injured, and 73 kidnapped in the line of duty. A species that destroys its most beneficial members is not as rational as it pretends to be.

Forsake foolishness, advance in understanding. Wisdom does not mince words about the way that leads toward an enlightened future. Education may be expensive, but ignorance is costlier still.

» ***How many opportunities does your parish offer for adult learning, growing, and moral formation?***

RCIA for incoming members, and most end their formal religious education programs at the point of Confirmation. This is doubly sad because experts assure us that the age for sincere religious questioning is from 18 to 35. If we want to have a meaningful conversation about the faith, that's the precise window to open, not to close.

Pastors offer a familiar litany of why there's little adult learning offered in their communities: no budget, no personnel, no time, no interest. If we're not here to encourage growth in faith, what are we doing? How much does it cost to start a Bible study or Catholic book club, open a parish library, bring in outside speakers once a season, or buy a few good video programs? Raising up an informed, invested assembly is worth any price. And if we fail to instruct our assembly, other forces surely will.

» ***What do you go to church to "get"? What services do you expect your parish to invest in?***

WHERE DO YOU DRAW THE LINE?

FIRST READING

JOSHUA 24:1-2A, 15-17, 18B

"If it does not please you to serve the LORD, decide today whom you will serve."

False gods are all around us, competing for our allegiance. Money, power, and celebrity are the golden idols fairly easy to spot. But that doesn't make them easy to resist. Addictions compel us to crawl on our bellies before them, surrendering our humanity along with our freedom. Then there are the small tin gods no rational person would worship—yet in our irrational moments, we fall down before them anyway: racial biases and ethnic prejudices, partisan shunning, road rage, or the choice for creature comforts over social needs. The tin gods are all masks for a single deity known as the self. It's our favorite false god, and how we cling to it!

Joshua once laid down the law for the tribes who had passed into the land of promise. Serve the true God and join with us. Choose another deity and go your own way. A nation could not be divided in ultimate loyalties and remain whole. The people known as Israel would serve the God of Abraham, and not dance after fashionable household gods.

» *Which alternative deities occasionally tug at your sleeve and invite your attention?*

SECOND READING

EPHESIANS 5:21-32

This is a great mystery, but I speak in reference to Christ and the church.

Wherever we decide to draw the line, establishing it between the sexes is not a helpful idea. St. Paul, like the prophet Hosea before him, appreciated how the love between a husband and wife could reveal the dynamic between the believer and God. In Hosea's case, his relationship with his wife, Gomer, was a negative model. Despite his loyalty to her, she remained disloyal to him. Paul redeemed the metaphor by presenting marital love as the model of Christ with his church. We are to serve one another, submit to one another, and love one another. When we do, the two identities become indivisible.

All of us know couples that seem to exist in perpetual conflict: blaming, hassling, and belittling each other in public and in private. Hopefully we've also been favored with the opposite example: that pairing of people which is so caring and supportive, we share in their peace when in their homes. In the same way, Church "works" when the community is a home that member and stranger alike experience as delightful to share.

» *Who presents to you a model of tranquil, tender relationship? How does your parish measure up to Paul's ideal of Church?*

GOSPEL

JOHN 6:60-69

Many of his disciples returned to their former way and no longer accompanied him.

Imagine walking out on Jesus. After a heyday of signs, miracles, and proclamations, something he says is so shocking, you count yourself out. You go home, shake the dust off your sandals, and return to business as usual. So much for the dream of a better kingdom!

Yet how many of us do exactly this? This discipleship stuff requires time, attention, study, and prayer. It invites us into relationships, service, responsibility, and commitment. It demands over time that we're transformed into new people entirely: the kind who forgive wrongs, aid the poor, welcome the stranger, love our enemies. At what point will we decide following Jesus is asking too much and return to a way of life that's easier and leaves more for us?

Attending synagogue on Saturdays was more convenient than traipsing around Galilee and having every assumption and value reexamined. Religion is easy. Discipleship is overwhelming. Do we draw the line between the two and remain on the safe side?

» *When did being faithful become more than going to church for you? How far are you willing to take this journey with Jesus?*

LET US PRAY...

Lord, you give us the gift of Eucharist to remind us of the goodness of shared bread and the thirst we all have for justice and peace. Create in us a desire to be generous with those who are in need. Let us serve you in our sisters and brothers, always seeking your face in the faces of the poor. Through Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

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