

(Commentary for August 2, 2006)
LOAVES AND FISHES GOSPEL
MORE ABOUT COMPASSION THAN FEEDING
by
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The story of the miracle of the loaves and fishes was read last Sunday in all Catholic and many other Christian churches. Earnest preachers emphasize the transformation of five loaves and a few fish into rations for five thousand with plenty of leftovers. But there is another story line here that explains why we sometimes experience this long ago miracle in our own lives?

. This reading is familiar not because, in different setting, we have all had the same experience. In this Gospel story the problem is not that the crowd lacks food but that it is short on spiritual insight. The point of the story is less nutrition than compassion.

Saint Matthew's Gospel makes Jesus's motivation clear. Looking at the hungry people who have followed him, Jesus says, "My heart is moved with pity for the crowd."

We can also wonder about the reaction of the crowd. Did they acclaim Jesus as the prophet for whom they had been waiting because he multiplied external food or because he enlarged their inner spiritual view of each other?

Did Jesus's compassion for them so move them that they experienced the change of heart essential to any spiritual growth so that, nourished by him, they were satisfied by just a taste of the tiny portions available?

Or did something else happen to them? Keeping to themselves even in a big group, had they also kept food for themselves unwilling to share it with others until Jesus moved them to compassion and they shared their supplies with each other?

By his manner and his words Jesus opened the eyes of the crowd before he filled their stomachs. What was this sudden spiritual insight that enabled these men and women to look at each other in a new way? Feeling the compassion of Jesus, they felt compassion for one another. They grasped that just as they all felt the same hunger so they also felt the same sorrows.

We have all been in crowds whose members keep to themselves. Think of the last time you were at an airport. As travelers we all carry the same brand of sorrow in our baggage. It never sets off the metal detectors or arouses the suspicion of security guards. You don't have to declare it to the customs agent.

*Letter to Eugene Kennedy
with I had had that intuition
in when I wrote G A T T S.*

Nobody, we think, even suspects the troubles we've had and we usually dread the possibility that, if we lower our guard, fellow passengers will tell us their troubles all the way to our destination. So we defend against that, as did the members of the crowd on that hillside, keen eyed for their hidden food but blind to each other's woes.

Jesus understands that, like everyone in that crowd on the hillside, all of us in the security line or on the airplane carry exactly the same garden variety sorrows, of losses and misunderstandings, of broken hearts and longing for love. We conceal these as we superficially reveal ourselves at airports, removing our shoes and jackets, carelessly tossing the trinkets that whisper of somebody's love for us, into an unloved tray, allowing a guard with a pirate's eye to paw through our bag as if it were a treasure chest, passing together through a miniature Last Judgment without noticing, except for an occasional shared smile, how much we are alike.

The Gospel story resonates on the plane where there may be a few bags of peanuts but nothing like five barley loaves and a couple of fish to toss at the crowd. We keep mostly to ourselves following the pilot's instructions to fasten our seat belts and to stay in our own cabin. Most of the time we regard each other as fellow detainees or fellow oarsmen on the galleys and do not sense how much our battered hearts resemble each other.

The miracle of the loaves and fishes happens every time we see, better than the airport X-Ray, the mixed inventory of grief and joy, discouragement and hope, that we are all carrying. It also occurs whenever we pause to see into the television images of people all over the world and realize that our common sorrow makes us closer than six degrees of relationship. The real reason that Jesus left the hillside was only in part to avoid the crowd's making him a king. He taught them, as he does us, how to work this miracle of multiplying nourishment by recognizing and bearing each other's sorrow and leaves us on our own to repeat it every day.