

18th Sunday in Ordinary Time Cycle A  
August 1, 1999

By Father Charles Bowes

Isaiah 55:1-3  
Romans 8:35, 37-39  
Matthew 14:13-21

## *God's love for us is good news we share.*

“Who will separate us from the love of Christ?” For the longest time, I misread the meaning of this chapter 8 of St. Paul’s letter to the Romans about the love of Christ. It was the word “of” that threw me. I took it to mean our love of God, not God’s love of us. Thus, trial or persecution or threats should not shake our love. No creature should come between us and our love for God; no power should overcome us. Love, in this reading, was a task to do, an achievement to be strived for. Our faith was a noble task of steadfast love on our part.

But it’s quite clear, however, that St. Paul is saying something else: Nothing in existence can ever separate us from the love that God, revealed in Jesus, has for us. Not only does the first interpretation miss the boat by focusing on our attitudes and desires; it fosters one of the most persistent mistakes about our faith. Christian faith is not primarily about something we do for God. It is about what God does for and in us. It is not so

much an account of human aspiration as it is a revelation of divine desire.

And in Isaiah, chapter 55, the covenant that Isaiah promised to David’s offspring could not be bought or earned. It was there for the taking, like water for the thirsty to drink. It was the gift of food that need not be purchased, wine and milk without cost. All we need do is accept the offer.

Now this could be troubling. Does it mean that we don’t have to work at all? Is our faith effortless? Are our actions, good or sinful, inconsequential in the eyes of God?

It certainly seems not – especially hearing St. Matthew chapter 14 today. After all, the dragnet parable about the reign of God suggests that we humans perform both good and evil acts. More troubling still, it seems that at the end of the world, there will be a host of angels that will separate the wicked from the just and cast the wicked into a fire, where they will grind their teeth. That statement sounds as though we actually can be separated from the love of God. It also sounds kind of scary.

So what’s going on here? Is it possible that the refusal of the gift, the rejection of God’s love, can separate us? Is faith in the promise, home in the covenant, acceptance of the love, the work we must do,

the only effort we must make to avoid damnation? Of that I'm not sure; it raises the awesome question whether anyone is eternally lost.

But I find comfort in the words of our psalm today, psalm 145, which suggests an answer: "The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and of great kindness. The Lord is good to all and compassionate toward all his works. The Lord is just in all his ways and holy in all his deeds. The Lord is near to all who call upon him, to all who call upon him in truth."

Jesus, his heart moved by compassion, cured the sick. More tellingly, when his disciples wanted to dismiss the pressing crowd to search for food, he told his followers to offer their own food freely. Five loaves and two fish fed thousands, the fragments filling twelve bushels. Maybe there is such a thing as a free lunch.

Somewhere in the mystery of God is an unlimited bounty, whether it makes sense to us or not. This God we meet in Jesus just does not work according to our ways. It may not make for good business, it may even be bad law, but whatever else it is, it seems to be God's way of loving. ...And folks, that's good news – news worth sharing. And that's one of the things we do as Catholic Christians – share our faith – we do it everyday at work and in the market place and at home. But we also try to do it even visiting our neighbors door to door. We're gearing up for that again now and so it's my privilege to invite everybody to pray and to be part of that effort through fasting and works of kindness. If you'll turn and look to the back of the church you'll notice a big sign-up sheet – times set aside for prayer for our Missionary Outreach to the neighborhoods. Feel free to sign up for a time to pray, to fast, to be part of our sharing in the good news of God's extraordinary love for everybody.

A young disciple came into the desert one day bringing a bunch of grapes to his hermit teacher. The teacher accepted them gratefully, but then, remembering another hermit a few miles away who might be hungry, he took only one grape and sent the bunch on. The second hermit did the same, taking one grape and sending the rest on to yet another hermit, and so on...until finally, throughout a whole region of the desert a bunch of grapes had been scattered. Each grape became a symbol of the love and caring that bound these solitaries together, even in their desert wilderness. This is another way of looking at the story of the loaves and fish – of how love can be shared – a different way of tasting the fullness of God's love even in the bare bones poverty of our humanness.

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