

**Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year B  
(Aug. 13, 2006)**

***Soul Food***

Some years ago I was at a birthday party for one of my nephews. After a rather substantial dinner we had cake and ice-cream and since the cake was a pretty big one there was plenty left over. A little later we were watching the news on television and there was a story about a food distribution project in Sudan. A crowd of people were surrounding a United Nations truck where the workers were handing out parcels of food. The people were excited, pushing and shoving each other trying to get close to the truck to receive as much as they could. My nephew, who was eight years old at the time, asked his mother “Why are they doing that? What is the matter?” She replied, “They are hungry. They don’t have enough food to eat.” My nephew became thoughtful for a few seconds. Then he looked up and with the simple but extraordinary sincerity that an eight-year-old can muster he said, “We ought to send them the rest of the birthday cake.”

At that moment I was enormously proud of my nephew. I thought to myself, “We’ve got a budding social activist on our hands.” I was proud, too, of my sister and her husband who somehow had conveyed to their children the idea that the good things we have are to be shared with those who have less or even nothing at all.

As I started to prepare this homily I read the following in a commentary on today’s readings:

“Picture this: your young neighbor’s husband was deployed to Iraq last year and was reported as missing in action several weeks ago. Today she received a call from his military commander that he had been found dead. He leaves behind not only his wife but three small children. What can you say to her? How can you ease her pain and share her grief? When words fail, you do what comes naturally: you prepare dinner for the young widow and her family. As you carry it over and present it to her, your message is clear. No words are needed. Food is the medium of communication.

“Food is a basic human need that has sustained each of us since we

were born. It speaks of loving and caring, giving and sharing, living and growing, and even dying and rising. Through the giving and receiving of food, we establish and strengthen relationships, and when they are strained, the sharing of food can even renew the ties that bind us one to the other.”

Over the next few weeks there will be much talk about food in our Sunday readings. In our first reading today we heard how Elijah sat under a broom tree and ate a hearth cake and drank a jug of water and that helped him understand that God was with him, that his mission was necessary, and that God would provide for his needs along the journey of 40 days that was ahead of him.

Two weeks ago we heard how Jesus fed hungry people. He gave them bread and fish to eat, an abundance of food so that everyone could be filled with plenty left over. Then Jesus ran away and hid from the people because he was afraid they wanted to make him king. But they ran after him and found him and like little Oliver they said, “I want some more.”

Today in our Gospel passage we plunge into the middle of a long discourse on the bread of life. It’s Jesus’ attempt to help the people understand that he has something more important to offer than the kind of food they are looking for. He wants to give them bread that will nourish them for eternal life, his body to eat and his blood to drink. It sounds scandalous to the people, and next week we will hear how they turn away from him before they have tried to grasp the meaning of what he is saying to them.

Well, we are all hungry aren’t we? And certainly one of the questions we must ask ourselves on these Sundays is, “For what do we hunger? For what do we thirst?” And how can we be satisfied? Like my nephew we might just want some birthday cake and ice-cream, or like those people in the Sudan we might lack the very necessities of life, but for most of us that will not be the case. But maybe we hunger for other things – a new car, a new house, a new job, a good marriage, a good family life. These are all legitimate things to want. The problem with us is that so often we are never satisfied. Like little Oliver and his orphan friends, we want some more. St. Augustine said it beautifully in a famous prayer, “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.” So all

these hungers, all these longings, are simply indications that we will not be satisfied until we realize that only God can fill our longings.

So we come here every Sunday, hungry people, needy people, and we share the bread of life and the cup of salvation, the body and blood of the Lord, and we pray sincerely to understand that our hearts, too, like Augustine's, are restless until they rest in God.