

**Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year B  
(Aug. 2, 2009)**

**Bread from Heaven**

A long time ago, in the year 304 in North Africa, a number of Christians were arrested for gathering to celebrate the Eucharist on Sunday. When the proconsul asked the owner of the house why he allowed these people in his house, he replied that they were his brothers and sisters. This did not satisfy the proconsul who insisted that he should have forbidden them entry. To that the owner of the house replied, “Without the day of the Lord, without the Eucharist we cannot live.” For these early Christians not to have the Eucharist at their Sunday celebrations would be like being dead and they were willing to risk the worst punishment, even martyrdom, to be able to share the body and blood of Christ.

At one point in the Book of Deuteronomy we hear Moses say to the people, “What great nation is there that has gods so close to it as the Lord, our God, is to us whenever we call upon him?” For Moses and the people the nearness of God was the greatest blessing that could be bestowed upon them. Well, we can say today that the God of Moses and the people he is addressing has bestowed upon us an even greater gift. That same God is even closer to us because he has gifted us with the Son who has taken on our flesh and blood and bone and has lived our life, shed our tears, felt our pain, and laughed our laughter. He has become one of us. But even more than that, the Son, Jesus, our Savior, has given us a still greater gift, the gift of himself in the form of bread and wine, the Eucharist that those early Christians were so eager to share that they were willing to risk their lives to come together for their Sunday celebrations.

Last week we heard how Jesus fed the multitude of people who were following him and who were hungry. This week in we heard the beginning of what has been called the discourse on the bread of life, a sermon that John the Evangelist tells us Jesus preached to the people to explain what it was he had done for them.

For just a moment this morning I would like to put this into a

larger context which occurs to me as we hear these passages from scripture. It is the context of love, the love of God for us primarily, but also our response to that love.

Earlier in John's Gospel we heard Jesus say to Nicodemus, "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that those who believe in him might have eternal life." But you know God had been showing his love for his people all along throughout their history right from the dawn of creation when his abundant love overflowed into the marvels of this world he fashioned and when he allowed that world to grow until it reached a kind of apex or climax in human beings whom he then made in his own image and likeness. So great was his love that he wanted us to be in some way like himself. This is the God who loved his people so much that he heard them cry out in their misery and sent Moses to free them from slavery. This is the God who loved his people so much that he would not let them die of starvation but who gave them bread in the desert to satisfy their hunger. This is the God who loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, and that Son in turn loved us all so much that he died for us. As he told his disciples the night before he died, "There is no greater love than this, to give your life for your friends."

My dear friends, it is all about God's love. That's why Jesus gave us the bread of life. He wanted us to have some visible, tangible sign of his abiding presence and his love for all of us.

This past Friday we celebrated the Feast of St. Ignatius. Ignatius gave us the Spiritual Exercises in which he hopes that we will accept the gifts God has given us, which means accepting God's love and responding in our own lives. Ignatius urges us to look at Jesus, to get to know him better, because he is convinced that once we know him we will be moved to love him simply because he is so lovable, and once we love him we will follow him. For him this was a natural progression: from knowledge to love to following. Following of course means serving him, and he let us know what it means to serve. It means to see to each other's needs. The fact is that the only way we know that we love God is if we take care of one another. And remember the ones who need the greatest care are those who are most vulnerable: the poor, the weak, the hungry, the homeless, and those whom the Bible mentions over and over: widows, orphans and aliens. Translate

that as women, children, and immigrants.

On this day when the Gospel asks us to reflect on the gift of the Bread of Life from a gracious, loving God, we might think, too, how our celebration is Eucharist, that is, thanksgiving. When we come to this celebration we come first of all to thank God for all these gifts, for all this love, and we would do well today to spend some time just asking our good God to grace us with greater knowledge of his Son, a burning love, and the strength to serve him more generously. As Ignatius instructs, we ask to know him more intimately, love him more ardently, follow him more closely – or as the song from “Godspell” has it: see thee more clearly, love thee more dearly, follow thee more nearly, day by day.