19th Sunday of the Year – Cycle B – 8/9/2015

“The Bread of Life, Four Inches at a Time”

1 Kings 19:4-8
Psalm 34:2-3, 4-5, 6-7, 8-9
Ephesians 4:30-5:2
John 6:41-51

An elderly man was seated in the doctor's waiting room. When he was called in to see the doctor, he slowly got up, and, grasping his cane and hunching over, slowly made his way into the examining room. After only a few minutes, he emerged from the room, walking completely upright. Another patient who had watched him hobble into the room all hunched over, stared in amazement. “That must be a miracle doctor in there.” the waiting patient exclaimed. “What treatment did he give you? What's his secret?” The elderly gentleman stared at him and said, “Well, the doctor looked me up and down, analyzed the situation, and gave me a cane that was four inches longer than the one I had been using.”

I’m sure many of us have experienced times in our lives when we were in serious need of help only to find that the solution to our problem, that which we really NEED, is as simple and profound as in this story. Often, it seems that we fail to see the solution because of the things that prevent us like the nature of the predicament in which we find ourselves or our preoccupation with it. Or it might be our pride or our prejudices or our preconceptions. Do we allow these things to prevent us from EXPERIENCING and ACCEPTING the help we really NEED when we need it or ask for it? In the Our Father we pray “Give us this day our daily bread” which means, “Father give us this day what we NEED” but is that enough for us or do we expect more? “What treatment did he give you? What's his secret?” Sometimes we miss the fact that the treatment or secret is this “daily bread”, the gift of God’s providence, which makes the remarkable happen before us in simple and profound ways.
We see this in our first reading. Elijah is fleeing for his life from Jezebel after showing the power of God and destroying all of the prophets of the pagan god Baal. He was the last of the God’s prophets in Israel and was exhausted, tired of fighting and tired of fleeing; he simply wanted to be delivered from his extreme hardship and die. Despite all he had done however in God’s service, his mission was not complete. Even though he wanted to give up and die, God provide bread in the form of a hearth cake and water for nourishment and the strength to carry on. As a result Elijah would eventually complete his service to God and as you may remember was taken into Heaven in a flaming chariot. In today’s reading Elijah was given what he NEEDED, his daily bread, literally, as a simple yet profound gift from God in order to continue to do his work in a remarkable way and with great affect.

This is reaffirmed in today’s responsorial Psalm: “Taste and see the goodness of the LORD.” “I sought the LORD, and he answered me and delivered me from all my fears.” In other words, God will give us what we need because we ask and WHAT he gives us is good and the best thing for us whether it fits our expectations or not.

The people in today’s Gospel experience this as well. Jesus tells His people that God will provide the “bread of life” that is necessary to receive the promise of eternal life. Today Jesus however, also tells them that this “bread of Life” is none other than Himself; He is the “bread come down from Heaven”. They know him as a carpenter and the son of Joseph and Mary and therefore because of the reasons I mentioned earlier, they fail to see or even open themselves up to this as a possibility despite their waiting and hoping for generations. They murmur amongst themselves because of their expectations and because of what they think they know about Jesus. We have the benefit of the scriptures to help us understand but this doesn’t seem to be enough sometimes. We can become so blinded by our problems, predicaments, preoccupations, etc. that we fail to stop and realize, like Elijah, that we sometimes need to nourish ourselves over and over again before we can get up and move forward. And not only will God provide the nourishment we need, it is in fact Him who draws us to it.
Today we celebrate[d] the Anointing of the Sick, the sacrament in which we are drawn to God because we need healing of some kind. In this and all of the sacraments, we are given the nourishment we need, through Grace, to continue to do God’s work here on earth. Here’s an example. My dad was a huge fan of the Jesuits, Jesuit schools, Jesuit institutions (Jesuit coffee and fudge if such a thing existed), etc. and he was a follower of St. Ignatius’ spirituality which I think helped him tremendously when he was diagnosed with cancer. He received the sacraments often including the Anointing of the Sick as he faced the many set back resulting from his fight with lung cancer. Each time he came through one of these episodes I would say to him, “I don’t know what your mission here on earth is, but obviously it’s not complete yet.” And we would laugh. He finally passed away, peacefully, on the morning of July 31, 2009, (which just passed 10 days ago) on the feast of St. Ignatius Loyola, his patron saint. Although the loss was difficult we immediately found comfort in this knowledge because we realized that God gave him what he needed until the time he was ready to receive the gift we all desire: eternal life. And we hope that is exactly what happened.

We are drawn to God to help us cope with the struggles we endure here on earth, whether it is physical, mental, emotional or spiritual and many of them are serious and with no simple remedy. But we must be open to receiving what we truly need AS OUR daily bread rather than being stifled or blinded by what we expect. Many who do suffer find relief in the sacraments in the form of the peace and strength that comes from the understanding of the sacraments as God’s gift of his “daily bread” which CAN DO remarkable things in simple and profound ways. This is the not-so-secret treatment of Christ, the miracle physician who calls us all by name to His examination room, if you will, when we are hunched over and slowed down by the challenges of life to offer us the help we NEED in the form of the Bread of Life, four inches at a time.