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by Carol J. Dempsey

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Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

[July 29, 2018](#)

2 Kings 4:42-44

Psalms 145

Ephesians 4:1-6

John 6:1-15

I remember growing up in a family in the mid-1950s into the mid-1970s, and not until the mid-1980s did my parents have an empty nest after my sister and brother left home to marry. Our family was a one-income household, though my Dad worked two jobs until he started his own business. We always had what we needed, but we lived simply. We were three children and their parents living in a five-room house. Our family home was always a place of welcome.

Sometimes, a relative or friend would stop by at dinnertime. Sometimes, we children would bring home friends near dinnertime and ask if they could join us for dinner. Our mom would look at the fish in the pan or the casserole almost ready to come out of the oven and wonder if the food would be enough. Our dad was always certain that we would have enough food for everyone. Surprisingly, we always did have enough food when it was set out on the table because, being conscious of everyone at the table, we shared. At the table, we sometimes had strong disagreements in the midst of our conversations, but always we treated each other with civility in order to preserve the bond of unity among us as a family.

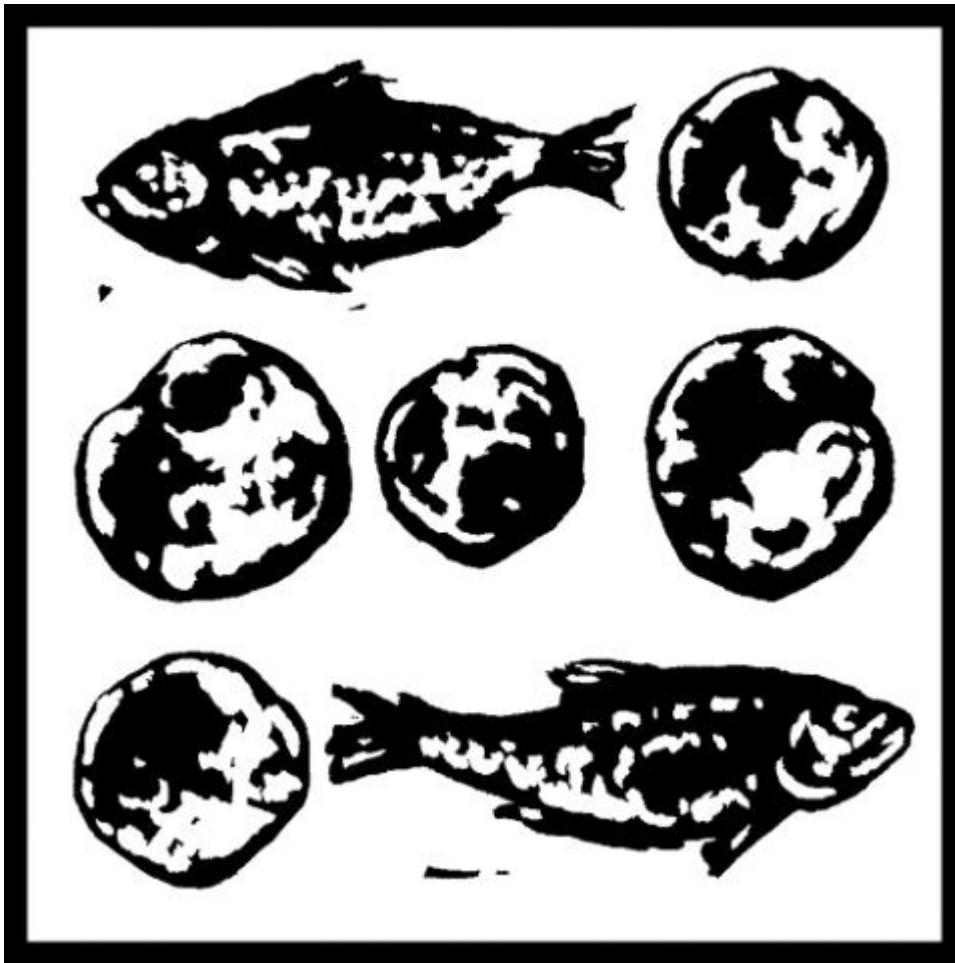
This Sunday's readings focus on sharing and practicing virtues so that the bond of unity can be preserved within the human community and among all its members. The readings remind us that we have all been given of the one Spirit who lives and breathes within us and among us all.

An unnamed servant of the prophet Elisha is hesitant that the 20 barley loaves he brings to the prophet will be enough to feed the 100 people gathered in their vicinity. Elisha, however, is confident that the loaves will be able to provide food for

all. So, the servant distributes the loaves. All eat, and in testimony to God's word that the prophet quotes, some bread is left over. What is the miracle here? Is it the fact that 20 barley loaves suddenly multiplied in number or grew in size? Perhaps the miracle is that all the people became truly conscious of one another, and took only what they needed from a loaf so that others could also have a share of the bread, with no one going hungry and no one doing without?

Psalm 145 calls upon all creation to give thanks to God. God's faithful ones are to bless God, and everyone is to talk about the magnificence of God's reign and might. The divine reign and power do not speak of a hierarchical domination. The use of divine might is for the sake of the other to satisfy the needs of both human and non-human life, and thus bring about the flourishing of all creation that will be a sign of God's reign.

In the Letter to the Ephesians, Paul urges the believing community members at Ephesus to live a life worthy of the call they have received. They are to follow the way of Christ who embodied a virtuous life of love. Paul's words of encouragement highlight specific virtues that the community members are to practice so that they can preserve the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace. Diverse as they may be, the people are essentially one body and one Spirit through Christ.



(Mark Bartholomew)

Through that communion, they are also united to God whose Spirit remains alive in the midst of all creation. A life lived in humility, with patience and the ability to bear with the other through love, also safeguards right relationships and ensures the practice of civility among the community's many members.

The Gospel from John develops the theme of sharing heard earlier in the reading from 2 Kings. Captivated by Jesus' healings, a large crowd follows Jesus, and he wants to feed them, but buying food for such a multitude is impossible. Andrew, one of Jesus' disciples, draws attention to a young boy with five barley loaves and two fish. Andrew notes that such a small amount of provisions is inadequate for the large crowd. Jesus, however, like Elisha, is able to feed everyone through the miracle of sharing. All partake of the loaves and fish, and leftovers remain.

In sum, this Sunday's readings describe how life flourishes when virtues are practiced. In a world of both over-consumption on the part of some people and far too many broken relationships, these readings invite us to live simply and virtuously.

The readings call us to be forever mindful of others' needs while striving to grow ever more deeply into the divine vision of one body, one family, so deeply loved by one God.

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[Carol J. Dempsey is a Dominican Sister of Caldwell, New Jersey, and professor of biblical studies at the University of Portland, Oregon.]

Editor's note: This Sunday scripture commentary appears in full in NCR's sister publication Celebration, a worship and homiletic resource. Request a sample issue at CelebrationPublications.org. Sign up to receive [email newsletters](#) every time Spiritual Reflections is posted.

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