

Laetare, 2006
Text: John 6:1-15
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✠Grace, Mercy, and Peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ ✠

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In the prayers of the Church we often ask that the Lord would protect from "despair of his mercy." That is what Philip and Andrew have fallen into in the Gospel lesson – just as the children of Israel fell into it in the Old Testament lesson when they grumbled against the Lord. To despair of the Lord's mercy means you still believe in the Lord, you just don't believe he's there for you. "Why didn't the Lord just leave us in Egypt to die!" "Two hundred days' wages wouldn't be enough to feed these people, Jesus! Why did you bring them out here like this?" "Here's a couple of fish and a few loaves – but whoopdeedoo, that won't feed thousands." That is the voice of despair, the voice that says that the Lord's mercy has come to an end.

And can you not see yourselves in Philip's shoes? Have you never cried out with him: Why have I lost my job? Why doesn't he love me? Why have I gotten sick? Why, O Lord, has this happened to me? O Lord, your mercy has run out. You have forgotten me.

Repent. Not a sparrow falls to the ground without your heavenly Father's notice – and you are worth much more to him than they. He knows what you need and he has arranged for it before you even ask. He is not just merciful, he is Mercy itself. Philip failed the test even after he had seen so many miracles from Jesus, he despaired of the Lord's mercy. The Israelites failed the test even after they had seen so many miracles from the Lord through the hand of Moses, they despaired of the Lord's mercy. But note how gently the Lord turns them from their despair and back to trust in his mercy. The Lord provides. In the desert he rains down manna to feed millions. In a grassy place with no market for bread for miles around, he does for his disciples what he would not do for himself: multiply loaves to alleviate hunger.

So rejoice dear Christian that the Lord does this for you. That your needs are met. That the Lord cares for you. But do not do as the people in the Gospel lesson now do. They misunderstand the Lord's gift and see it as an end in itself. He multiplies bread for them and all they see is a meal ticket: let's make this man king

and we'll never have to work another day in our lives! He can just feed us with his miraculous power! This misses the point of the miracle. A miracle of Jesus is never an end in itself – it is what St. John the Evangelist always calls it: a sign. A sign is not the thing itself, but rather points to the thing. That Jesus provides earthly food for these people is not the thing to focus on – it is rather a sign that this Jesus is the one who can provide true spiritual sustenance and nourishment.

The people miss this and so seek to make Jesus their earthly Bread King. But Jesus will have none of it. He hides himself from them for they do not want him: they want a free lunch everyday for the rest of their lives. They haven't thought about what happens after that. But the "after that" is what Jesus is there for. Jesus is the Bread from Heaven which gives eternal life. The earthly bread is but a sign of this.

And so it is with you Christian. Rejoice when the Lord heals the disease, or mends the marriage, or saves from the car accident, or provides a new job. Look to him for these and all other good things. But do not mistake these signs of the Lord's favor for the thing itself. They are but signs that are meant to point you to the real thing: eternal salvation in Christ. You see, no matter how easy your earthly life is, even if the Lord should rain down a million dollars a day into your living room, still you will die. Even if the Lord pays off your mortgage, still you will die. Even if the Lord heals the disease that afflicts you today, someday you will still die. And what then? What about after that?

Thus the Lord uses the hardships and sufferings of this life – the ruinous results of rebellious sin – to draw us closer to him. He does not delight in seeing you suffer. He takes no sadistic pleasure in the hardship that you are now facing. But he does use this evil for good. He draws you deeper into his loving care. And he uses these things to show you the one thing needful. You come to him with a problem and he seeks to show you the truest answer. Sometimes that answer will not make sense to you because you are still weak and young.

It is like a child who cries out to his father that she is afraid of the monsters who live in her closet. The suffering of the child is real. Her anxiety about the monsters is real. But the father knows that this is not her real problem. It is a shadow problem, the significance of it is of her own devising. If she fixates on these monsters, the rest of her life, her real life, will suffer. So what does the father do? He goes about providing for his daughter's real needs: he clothes her, feeds her, provides a roof over her head. If she should ever say to her father, "Dad, thanks for the food and all, and the clothes are nice, and I really like this warm

house: but when are you going to take care of the monsters in the closet?" the father would respond by saying, "Trust me, honey, if you eat your supper and look both ways when you cross the street, the monsters won't be any bother to you. They cannot really hurt you."

And now do you understand, dear daughters and sons of God? You come to God with your monsters: the mortgage is late, my love life is a mess, my job is gone. And your blessed Savior gives you an answer that perhaps you didn't expect. You ask about the mortgage and the job and the love life and he says to you: I died for you on the cross, my suffering covers yours, I forgive you your sins and I love you. Cling to me and these monsters will never be able to hurt you. One day you will be older. One day you will understand. These monsters will melt before your eyes and never bother you again; one day you'll realize that they are not in the truest sense real. I am Real. One day even death itself will melt away when I return to finish it off forever. For I am the Resurrection and the Life. Trust me, child, know that I love you. Here, eat your Supper, my Supper. Go on, take, eat, this is my Body; take Drink, this is my Blood. My flesh which was given for the life of the world is real food and my blood is real drink. Trust me, if you eat your Supper, these monsters have no real power over you and I will raise you up on the Last Day.

Amen Lord Jesus. Come swiftly and let us rejoice.

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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Now the peace of God which passes all understanding will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

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