

Father O'Connor's Homily for 1 August 2021
18th Sunday in Ordinary Time-B

Exodus 16: 2-4, 12-15
Ephesians 4: 17, 20-24
John 6: 24-35

Jesus said, "Do not work for food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life."

Think about this. Everything – everything – we now own will be gone one day when we die. Our Wedgewood and our Waterford, our savings and our investments, our homes and our cars. Everything that you and I now own will be left behind one day. It is a truth that we cannot dance around.

We hear the wise and caring voice of Jesus telling us: "Do not work for food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life."

What is Jesus talking about? Such things as: justice and mercy, faithfulness and forgiveness, love and compassion. These are some enduring things that Jesus has in mind – things that will give us deep happiness here on earth, and are "the passport to heaven."

But these things sound so general. How can I state Jesus' teaching in a more specific way that you will more likely remember? The answer, of course, is a story. And this one, if you listen closely, is but a variation on today's Gospel.

Once upon a time, there was a king who was very sad. Even though he was loved by the queen, revered by his subjects and feared by his enemies, he did not have any children. "Who will carry on my work and my memory if I do not have an heir to my throne?" he wondered.

A reward was offered to anyone who could advise the royal couple how to fulfill their dream successfully, while death was threatened for those who tried and failed.

An elderly woman came to the king and the queen and told them that a child could be theirs if the king did what she requested. "And what is that?" he asked.

"Your Majesty, there is no system in the kingdom for delivering pure water for us to drink and cook with. And so there is much sickness in the land. Have your army dig canals so that pure water comes to us from a clean source."

“And this will bring me a child?” the king asked. “Assuredly,” she replied with a smile.

So the king commanded that a system of canals be built. And then sickness disappeared in the kingdom. But after many months there still was no child for the king and queen.

“You have lied to me,” the king said to the woman. “Prepare to die!”

But the old woman answered, “Your Majesty, you have only fulfilled part of what is required. You must now parcel out land to all of your subjects so that they can raise food to feed their families and to sell for their livelihood.”

“Why should I give away what is mine?” the king roared.

“So that you might have someone with your name to follow you,” she said softly.

And so the king did as the woman had instructed him. Every family was given a plot of land for their own. And for the first time in memory, they could all feed their families and earn a living.

The king and queen waited, but still no child was on the way.

The king once again summoned the old woman and threatened her with death. But she said, “Your Majesty may kill me, but then you will never know if the last requirement will bear fruit.”

“The last?” he asked.

“Yes, one last thing you must do to ensure that you have an heir. You must dismantle your army. For the last twenty years our kingdom has fought war after war. Make lasting treaties with your neighbors, and then you will have a child.”

And so it was done. For the first time that anyone could remember young men remained home to plow the fields and to care for their families. And children played safely at the borders.

Now the king was sure that he would receive his heart’s desire. But as time went on, he still did not have a child.

And so once again he summoned the old woman to the palace and threatened her with death.

She went over to the open window and said: “Your Majesty, your wife was barren and so was the land. Your people died of sickness and starvation and war.

“Now look out at your kingdom! You have given your people health and food and peace. You have given them a better life, and your name is

spoken with gratitude. Children are being named after you, and your name will be passed on to their children and their children's children. Through your acts of loving kindness, you will be remembered as the father of all the children of this land."

The king gazed at the new kingdom he had created. Taking her hand in his, he knew that she was right. His children would now number with the stars and he would be remembered as a father forever.

Jesus said, "Do not work for food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you.... I am the bread of life."

Without exception, every material thing we now own will be left behind someday. In all my years of conducting funerals, I have never seen a funeral hearse pulling a U-Haul trailer to the cemetery. At our death we leave everything behind.

What will our spiritual legacy be?

Today's Gospel and today's story challenge us: will we be like the king who did not get what he wanted, but gained everything he needed to be a saint? And who not only passed it on, but took it with him?

You know the familiar questions of Jesus: "Did you feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, visit the sick and the imprisoned?"

These are the questions that resound to the ends of the earth, and the answers that rebound to the kingdom of heaven.

"Do not work for food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you.... I am the bread of life."