

[Readings: 2 Kings 4:42-44; Psalm 145; Ephesians 4:1-6; John 6:1-15]

A man I know grew up believing his grandma was actually with Jesus when he fed the 5,000. He came to that belief because whenever that particular Gospel would be read, everyone in the family whispered, "Grandma musta' been there!" And they would laugh. They all knew that no matter how many people arrived for dinner -- even unexpectedly -- that everyone ate and there was always plenty left over. "My family was never rich," my acquaintance said, "especially when my mom was growing up, but they never felt poor, either."

Jesus knows the feeling of relief when the hungry are fed. Anyone who has served in a soup kitchen sees sad, uncomfortable and even ashamed people holding empty plates. Then they see a transformation take place. The plates, now brimming with food, don't hold only food; they also carry a sense of renewed hope for another day. They see faces that say, "Someone cares. Someone cares enough to feed me."

How much more does Jesus Christ Himself care for us! You and I are nourished at every Mass. But then, we are not called to sit passively and rest in our comfort and pleasure. We are called to be family for one another.

Speaking of family, it should come as no surprise that Pope Francis has established a World Day for Grandparents and the Elderly.

Its first observance is today, a date chosen because it's the closest Sunday to the feast of Sts. Joachim and Anne, Mary's dad and mom, Jesus' grandpa and grandma. In a lot of ways, the Church has the pope's grandmother to thank for this new annual observance. And, it's a way Francis is showing appreciation for his own grandmother and paying tribute to her memory.

For those of us who may be elderly, and I have to include myself, because I am no longer middle aged, as I will be 67 in October, and I don't think I will live to be 137 years old!, this moment is an opportunity to reflect upon how we may continue to answer the Lord's call in our lives. In his message commemorating the day, Pope Francis, being 84 years old himself, seemed to write less as the Holy Father and more as a peer to the elderly.

He describes how, no matter the season of life, the Lord remains close to his people with “new possibilities, new ideas, and new consolations.”

He writes, “I was called to become the Bishop of Rome when I had reached, so to speak, retirement age (he was elected at age 78!) and thought I would not be doing anything new. One’s vocation never ends -- and for the elderly that vocation is “to preserve our roots, to pass on the Faith to the young and to care for the little ones.” “It makes no difference how old you are, whether you still work or not, whether you are alone or have a family, whether you became a grandmother or grandfather at a young age or later, whether you are still independent or need assistance,” he continued. “Because there is no retirement age from the work of proclaiming the Gospel and handing down traditions to your grandchildren. You just need to set out and undertake something new.”

As he’s noted: “The words of grandparents contain something special for young people. And they know it. The words that my grandmother gave me in writing the day of my priestly ordination I still carry with me, always, in the breviary. And I read them often, and they do me good.”

Yes, the world has changed so much since the 1930s and ’40s when Pope Francis was a boy, but some things haven’t. Some things never will.

Families, neighborhoods, parishes and communities are multigenerational. And those who are grandparents, those who are elders, are called to play a role, to live a vocation, by helping those who are younger. From preschoolers to “middle-agers.” And those who are younger would be wise – and would have the opportunity to become wiser -- if they open their arms, their hearts, minds and souls to the lessons and love the elderly can share. Want to share.

After the death of an elderly relative, it’s so common for a member of a younger generation to sadly say, “I wish I had asked ... I wish I had listened more ... I wish I had better appreciated” This July celebration can be a reminder to ask, to listen, and to appreciate.

If you’re a grandparent, an elder, the same holds true for the world of your childhood, of your teen, young adult and middle-age years.

Living through that time, those times, has presented many, many opportunities. Some of you may have rushed to meet and enjoyed the challenge.

Other events that you would have done just about anything to avoid, were thrust upon you. They are the crosses, large and small, that have dotted your life on earth. Welcomed or unwelcomed, they were the seeds that, over time, over prayer, became the wisdom you have today -- that is, the knowledge blessed and transformed by the Holy Spirit. Again and again, they've been your "personal Pentecosts." And now, like the apostles, you're to go out and share what you know, what you received.

Or, for elders who are completely or almost completely homebound, to stay in and share what you know. To pray for and offer a helping hand -- and sometimes a well-meant and gentle nudge -- to a member of a younger generation. Then, too, it's one of the best ways to show your appreciation for the grandparents and elders who did just that for you when you were young. It's a truly blessed way of paying tribute to their beloved memory.

Grandparents and the elderly are also, or can be, powerful influencers. By what they say and what they do. By how they lived and how they're living now. Simply put, by what they value.

Grandparents have more power than they realize. As does the elderly man or woman who lives down the block (or always sits in that pew at Mass) and has a kind word for little ones. And not-so-little-ones.

Young people: Spend a little time with a member of the senior generation --if only a few minutes -- and you can come away with a grain of wisdom, a glimpse of perspective, that can brighten your day, ease your worries and, maybe, even deeply enhance your life. Plus, you will be making that senior's day. You will have given them a tremendous gift, bigger than you can possibly imagine ... until you yourself are an old-timer. You bring Jesus to them.

Every time all of us are nourished by His Body and Blood, every time we gather around the table of the Eucharist, we become His hands and feet, His eyes and ears, His heart and soul in a Church and a world that is very, very hungry indeed.

That's where St. Paul's reading from the Letter to the Ephesians comes in. It's the end of the letter, and as usual, Paul makes his final point of the letter his hope, his dream and his heartfelt prayers for the infant Church. This is what he says and I am paraphrasing here:

Abused people are hungry for that kind of gentleness which only you can provide. Feed them with your gentleness.

There are those whose bodies and spirits are giving in to the hunger of illness, disease and old age. They need to be nourished with the food of your patience. Feed them with your patience.

Those who feel unloved, unvalued and unwanted need to be fed with the great love you have kept hidden in your heart. Feed them with your love.

Those who seek to divide and conquer need to know and experience the peace that only you can bring. Feed them with your peace.

This week, you will encounter someone whose eyes are begging for your spiritual or physical help. It's real and it's desperate. The power is in your heart and in your hands. In your home and in your wallet. In your own lingering hunger, which will only be satisfied and filled in no other way than this. AMEN!