

NINETEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME — B

READING I 1 Kgs 19:4-8

READING II Eph 4:30-5:2

GOSPEL Jn 6:41-51a

Around the middle of the ninth century B.C., Elijah incurred the wrath of Queen Jezebel, who was bent on systematically crushing Israel's faith in the northern kingdom. In this scene on Mount Carmel, Elijah incited his followers to kill Jezebel's prophets of Baal. His success meant that he had to flee. Discouraged, he made his way back to Horeb (Sinai). On the way, God provided for him as he provided for the people of Moses' time, namely, by offering food and drink. Just as Moses was forty days and nights on the mountain, so too Elijah took forty days and nights to reach the mountain of God. Like Moses, he experienced God in a theophany. The outcome of the experience was that Elijah identified himself as a new Moses who would courageously continue the fight against Jezebel and her forces. By giving of himself, Elijah resolves his identity crisis.

The author of Ephesians develops an ethic of Christian life based on God's action in Jesus. He first suggests a view in which an injury to one's neighbor is an affront to God's Spirit dwelling in the believer. Next, the norm for forgiving is the action of God in Christ. Finally, the norm for loving is the action of God in Christ. Here, the author expands on Jesus' self-giving by using the language of sacrifice: An offering to God; A gift of pleasing fragrance. Significant, is that Jesus does not offer something; He offers himself. Only such self-giving identifies a person as an imitator of God.

In John, Jesus employs one of life's staples, bread, to symbolize his person and his work. In turn, the symbol is calculated to reveal the Father and his plan. Jesus quotes Is 54:13, that all will be taught by God. Jesus fulfills this by presenting himself as the one who provides what is contained in the religious symbol of bread. Since bread maintains life, Jesus will maintain life in all who come to him in faith. For their part, the people must look beyond mere human credentials (Jesus' family origins) and perceive him as the revelation of the Father. At the end of his Gospel, John links this bread with Jesus' redemptive death: The bread is his flesh for the life of the world. John thereby identifies Jesus' revelation of the Father in terms of his self-giving. To accept Jesus as the living bread is to accept him as the self-giving expression of the Father's love in his death-glorification.

Identity means self-giving. We ask who we really are but attempt to answer only by looking within ourselves. We seek to discover our real identity but try to explore only in terms of ourselves. We wish to know our true selves but seek to understand only within

our own framework. We are not yet able to break beyond our egoistic barrier and break out for others. Identity means self-giving.

Despite his frustration and discouragement, Elijah learns to identify himself as a new Moses. He will return to the northern kingdom. He will preach fidelity to God's Word. He will continue to oppose the paganizing politics of Jezebel. His journey to Horeb and subsequent revelation have resolved the identity crisis: Elijah will give himself to meet the needs of his people after the manner of Moses. In this picture of Elijah, identity means self-giving.

In John, Jesus identifies himself in terms of bread. This staple nourishes and sustains life. Therefore, Jesus will nourish and sustain the life of his followers. He will be that bread himself, especially in his death-glorification. Such self-giving will provide him with an identity and at the same time manifest the plan and world view of the Father. By giving himself in sacrifice, Jesus uncovers his real self. In John, identity means self-giving.

Husbands and wives who continue to think in terms of each other know who they really are. Those who defend the rights of the poor learn their true identity. The sick and the dying who provide joy and peace to those around them know their real selves. Church officials who act instinctively on behalf of the common good discover who they really are. All such people have learned to focus on others and, by so doing, learn their true identity. Identity means self-giving.

Eucharist presents the Jesus who understands himself in terms of bread. Eucharist dwells on a Jesus who continues to nourish and provide. In turn, Eucharist challenges the believing community to apply Jesus' identity quest to itself. That community is to find its true self by looking to the needs of all. In Eucharist, too, identity means self-giving.