

Today we continue our 5-week journey through John Ch.6. Last week we heard of Jesus feeding a large crowd with just five loaves and two fish. And this week we begin the Bread of Life Discourse that will continue on through much of August., John Ch.6, in a lot of ways, can be thought to be St. John's eucharistic theology. That sounds important, doesn't it? It sounds like it might even be the reason for all of this (*gesture to the altar*).

There are so many avenues worth exploring to talk about today's Gospel – so where's a preacher to start?

One avenue could be that I take this opportunity to talk to you about the significance of the Holy Eucharist and our duty to come to the altar properly disposed and reverently prepared. I could quote the catechism at you – yes, we do have a catechism, *it begins on page 843 of our Book of Common Prayer* – and in doing so, remind you that “it is required that we should examine our lives, repent of our sins, and be in love and charity with all people” if we are to worthily receive Communion. I might even remind us of the dangers of an unworthy communion, of ignoring the Church's teaching on the Real Presence of Jesus in the consecrated bread and wine. Fire-and-brimstone!

That's one avenue...

Of course, after Mass, there might be some who would congratulate me – and themselves – for giving their lazy pew-mates a good dose of *ole'-time religion*, while there might be others who decide they really don't want to be scolded from the pulpit for not being aware of something that, perhaps, they were never taught in the maturity of their faith. Preaching is dangerous work, I can tell you.

Travelling down another avenue, a preacher could decide that the Bread of Life discourse is a great opportunity to state that what we really need today is for more Christians to have a solid grasp on the profound nature of the Sacred Mystery of the Altar. We could examine the Book of Common Prayer and the Catechism, but that would only be a basic primer, so I would, of course, have to appeal to some fresh-out-of-seminary vocabulary words – consubstantiation, transubstantiation, and so on – and wind up namedropping a long line of theologians of notable Anglican pedigree. I could take it upon myself to clear up those unfortunate misconceptions foisted on the unsuspecting communicant, who in certain contexts is given to understand that what we do here is nothing more than an ordinary meal from an ordinary table!

I could do that.

But then, of course, what would happen is that one or two of you might approach me after Mass and say, “well Father, that was certainly... interesting,” while the rest would just shake their heads quietly, thinking “don't they teach anything useful in seminary, like preaching?” or worse, “what have we gotten ourselves into with him?”

There is another avenue.

Many of you have participated in a hunger awareness dinner. Maybe it was the Oxfam hunger banquet or maybe it was the food-insecurity presentation.

Either way, these events are set up in similar ways. People are split into three different groupings: (1) a small table of people have a full table with setting, nice dishes, and get to eat meat and potatoes, and have something nice to drink; (2) another grouping of people have rice and beans, or macaroni and tuna; and then (3) the last and largest group have a half serving of either plain rice or plain macaroni. After the meal, with new experiential awareness, participants are told stories about people in our very own neighborhood and their personal experiences around food insecurity and hunger. These images of hunger are riveted onto our psyches.

I bring this up because truthfully, we face insecurity and hunger all the time. Material hunger and food insecurity are facts of our society that are all the more shameful and painful because of our country's great prosperity. Yet, there are other kinds of insecurity and hunger, too. And in addition to material hunger, we have these other hungers right here, even now. ...

Spiritual insecurity and spiritual hunger are as real as the physical and just as debilitating. Right here in this room today are people with all types of hungers ... all very real ... all very compelling.

Someone here is hungry for love ... hungry for affection ... hungry for acceptance. There is someone here hungry for understanding, for reconciliation ... hungry for peace, hungry for justice, for healing and health, for happiness ... hungry for fulfillment and purpose ... hungry for meaning and something to fill that God-shaped whole in their life that can be filled by nothing else.

This is exactly the experience of those folks we hear about in the Gospel today who had followed Jesus out into the countryside and then across the sea. They were hungry too. Jesus had fed their bellies with fish and bread. And after finding him again, they were still hungry. Jesus was feeding them on his word. But it wasn't enough. They didn't understand his words. They were too insecure and hungry for so many things to understand what he was saying.

And I wonder if we are really any different...

The people in the Gospel today had not perceived the true meaning of the miracle from the day before. They focused only on the material aspect of the feeding miracle and failed to recognize its spiritual significance. Jesus attempts to raise their minds from purely earthly concerns to that which leads to eternal life. But they still don't understand. And do we understand the miracle of Holy Eucharist?

Spiritual hunger has many companions, and to truly understand Jesus's message today, we must begin to recognize and name them.

Entrusting ourselves to Jesus enables us to get in touch with our deepest hunger, our deepest thirst, our deepest heart's desire. And once in touch with them, we begin to see the sheer superficiality, the emptiness, of so much of what drives people.

We see our rivalries and our self-interest, our resentments and hatred and suspicion of each other, for what they are – and we become free of them. God's project for saving our world gets under way in us; or as our Gospel lesson said: *This is the work of God, that you believe in the one whom he has sent.*

Jesus's time had not yet come for the ultimate sacrifice that would be the source of his presence for the generations to come. That meal held by Jesus in the wilderness of betrayal, and conspiracy with a hostile earthly power, and this meal (*gesture again towards the altar*) amid the wilderness of our chaotic age, both point beyond themselves to a future fulfillment. The Eucharist is a pledge and a foretaste of the perfect and complete union with our heavenly Father that we will enjoy in everlasting life, united to all the people of God, in the joy of fully knowing and loving God and each other.

And until then? Jesus's gift of giving himself on the cross is closely connected to the act of addressing insecurity and hunger. When the disciples witnessed the feeding of the 5,000 the previous day, they realized that this Jesus had more to give than what meets the eye.

He still does.

He does it in the sacraments. He does it through us.

The job of feeding the hungry thousands is now ours, the body of Christ.

But how often, faced with the opportunity to witness to our faith and share Christ with others, do we feel completely ill-equipped for the job? And we feel that what we have just isn't enough to take care of the hungers that surround us. It's okay to feel that way. It's okay to not be okay. Bring that feeling to the altar. That is why Christ left us the Eucharist: The miracle of taking a little and making it into much.

The call to the new revitalization of evangelism has been issued by our bishops because of the realization that many are insecure and many are hungry and have no one to lead them out of those places. As the baptized, we have been commissioned to go out to all the world, or at least to all the corners of the Quad-Cities, to bring others by invitation to the Truth, to invite them here. Because it is in this out-of-the-way place on Main Street and Brady that they will hear the Word and receive the Bread of Life, which "gives life to the world"! It is in this place, this very hour that we will receive the body and blood, soul, and divinity of the only One who can satisfy all of our hungering insecurities. And I want to share that with people!

It is a beginning. An act so small, so customary for many of us, that we might fall into the habit of taking it for granted. Or believing that it's about us. Or thinking it's just something you do because you've always done it. ...

It's not a coincidence that the Bread of Life Discourse comes on the heels of the feeding of the 5,000 – the story of a little that became a lot. God really does transform the world one heart, one soul, at a time. It begins in us, right here, right now, and through it, we take into our very beings the power and truth and goodness of the One who has created and redeemed the world. And if we can accept that, then together we will accomplish more than any fire-and-brimstone reprimands or pedantic theologizing could ever do.

So, come and be filled. Then go, and fill others.