

Proper 13B 2018 Sermon

John 6:24-35

The next day, when the people who remained after the feeding of the five thousand saw that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they themselves got into the boats and went to Capernaum looking for Jesus.

When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, "Rabbi, when did you come here?" Jesus answered them, "Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal." Then they said to him, "What must we do to perform the works of God?" Jesus answered them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent." So they said to him, "What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing? Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'" Then Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." They said to him, "Sir, give us this bread always."

Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

During Jesus' Last Supper with his disciples the night before he was crucified, he took bread, gave thanks, broke the bread, and gave it to his disciples, and said, "Take, eat: This is my Body, which is given for you. Do this for the remembrance of me." These words are called, "The words of Institution," since they instituted the Eucharist, which Christians have been celebrating ever since. The words of Institution are recorded in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, and in St. Paul's 1st Letter to the Corinthians.

But they are NOT recorded in John's Gospel. Jesus does NOT say these words at the Last Supper in the Gospel of John. Why?

John is writing his Gospel some 60 years *after* the Last Supper, and he has likely celebrated the Eucharist with his own community *at least* weekly during those 60 years – which would make a total of at least 3,120 celebrations of the Eucharist. And this has given him plenty of time to meditate on the *meaning* of this sacred meal – which is what he does throughout **Chapter 6** of his Gospel – a full 71 verses. We started reading Chapter 6 *last* Sunday, and it will take us the whole month of August – today and 3 more Sundays – to *finish* reading this one chapter about the meaning of the Eucharist; which should tell us that this is important

stuff for John, and for us! It's also why we began worship last week with a hymn about the Eucharist, and why we sing a *couple* of Eucharistic hymns today.

When you think about it, what John is doing is ingenious: Knowing that the Eucharist is not *just* a memorial of what happened at the Last Supper, but is rather something that embodies and interprets the **whole** of Jesus' life and love and ministry, John moves the Institution of the Eucharist, as it were, back in time into the very middle of Jesus' life and ministry among the people. For John, the multiplication of the loaves and fishes **is** the Institution of the Eucharist: for it symbolizes and enacts the sharing and multiplying of his life among people in their daily lives.

Now, in our Gospel reading *last* week, we heard Jesus ask Philip where they could get enough bread to feed the 5000 people who had gathered around – and we were told that Jesus asked that question in order to “test” Philip. I suggested that Jesus was not testing Philip's ingenuity or resourcefulness, but rather his consciousness. Would Philip see that Jesus was talking on a *spiritual* level, rather than a *physical* level? As it turned out, Philip was thinking on the *physical* level of reality, and was **missing** the *spiritual* reality. And as we go through this 6th Chapter in the coming weeks, that will be a common thread: Jesus speaking on a symbolic and spiritual level, while others are hearing him on a literal and physical level. In fact, that is a dynamic we see *throughout* John's Gospel: we saw it happen with Nicodemus in the 3rd chapter of John and the Samaritan Woman in the 4th Chapter. Jesus **speaking** from the *spiritual* consciousness of the kingdom of God, and others **hearing** at the *physical* level of this world.

Today's Gospel begins shortly *after* the multiplication of the loaves and fishes. Jesus has moved on, and the crowd tries to track him down again “because,” Jesus says, they “had eaten their fill of the loaves.” “But they have *not understood* the loaves as signs of God's care for people,” notes Fr. John Shea. “They are well acquainted with their *physical* hunger and deeply attached to filling it. But they are less acquainted with their *spiritual* hunger and **unsure** how to fill it. Jesus tells them that he himself, as the Son of Man, is the one who feeds them with *eternal* food”¹ – just as he told the Samaritan woman in Chapter 4 that he is the one who gives, not *physical* water, but “water gushing up to eternal life.” (v. 14)

In today's Gospel, when the crowd finds Jesus, they ask him, “What must we do to perform the works of God?” Now, the Jewish law said that God's people should do what God does – do the works of God. The crowd, stuck on the *physical* level of consciousness, wants to know what *outward* acts they must do to “perform the works of God.” Using the kind of clever word play which John loves, Jesus says to them, in effect, “**I am** the work of God. If you want to perform the **works** of God, you must believe in, trust in, and unite with, me.”

But the crowd *still* wants **physical**, miraculous proof that Jesus has, indeed, come from God. (Somehow the multiplication of the loaves and fish wasn't enough!)

“What sign are you going to give us?” they ask. “Moses gave our ancestors manna from heaven, and that validated Moses’ authority. What sign are *you* going to do to validate *your* authority?” And again, Jesus has to re-direct their consciousness, their way of seeing. What Moses gave was *physical* bread to satisfy their *physical* bellies; it wasn’t the **true** bread from heaven. “[I]t is *my Father* who gives you the **true** bread from heaven,” Jesus says to the crowd. “For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” *Still* thinking that what Jesus is talking about is an endless supply of physical bread, they say to him, “Sir, give us this bread always.”

Then Jesus speaks more clearly: “**I am** the bread of life,” he tells them. “Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” Fr. Shea explains: “Since ‘the bread of life’ (v. 35) is the *spiritual* nourishment that flows from God into the world, and since Jesus is the [One] who connects God to [the world] (John 1), he himself **is** the bread of life. And he is meant *for others*. Whoever comes to him will enter into [an abiding] relationship with the eternal and so they will never feel spiritual hunger or spiritual thirst.

“[But in] these exchanges [with the crowd] Jesus is dealing with a conventional religious consciousness that is difficult to change. It values miraculous deeds because they provide for *physical* needs and authenticate what a person says. **Conventional** religious consciousness stops *short* of considering the deeds as signs that reveal the **deeper** world of Spirit. In a similar way, those persons with this consciousness are concerned about actions that can be *seen* but not about the *interiority* of the **actor**, the [inner, spiritual] *place* that **enables** the actions to be performed. Their consciousness is locked into the visible, material, and temporal. The invisible, spiritual, and eternal elude them.”²

And it happens with us; it happens with me, all the time! This past week, I read in the news that the U.S. economy had grown in the Second Quarter, as had jobs. And I found myself thinking, “Wow! That’s fantastic! Our country is headed in the right direction, and things are looking up!” But then it hit me: I had just slipped into the mindset – which I think is very common in Western society – which gages human well-being almost exclusively by economic measurements. And I thought to myself: “I’m doing just what the crowd is doing in this 6th Chapter of John: confusing the *material* with the *spiritual*, I had forgotten Jesus’ teachings in his Sermon on the Mount: “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven [in the spirit], where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is [is it out there or in here?], there your heart will be also.” (Matthew 6:19-21) And again, Jesus says: “do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these

things. But strive **first** for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” (Matt. 6:31-33)

Do I seek outward gains, or inward transformation?

My friends, it is, indeed, a *different* consciousness that Jesus tries to awaken in us, a different perspective on the world and on our lives. Which is one more reason that daily spiritual practice is so vital. For the world *will* fill us with **its** perspective and consciousness without our even trying; but seeking first the Kingdom of God requires intentional focus and daily practice to counteract the pervasive consciousness of our world and its unmitigated preoccupation with what is physical and material, with **little**, if any, regard to what is spiritual. And yet, it is what we have gained in the *spiritual* world that we take with us when we die; **not** what we have gained in the *material* world.

My friends, nobody *ever* said it would be easy – certainly not Jesus! But when we become centered in the consciousness of the Kingdom of God, and feed our spirits on the Bread of Life, we can do the works of God – and the world will be fed through our lives.

AMEN

¹ John Shea, *Eating with the Bridegroom*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005, p. 195

² *ibid.*, p. 197