

Proper 13B 2021 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, saying, “Take, eat: This is my Body, which is given for you. Do this for the remembrance of me.” These words (together with the words he says when giving the wine) are called, “The Words of Institution,” since they instituted the Eucharist, the central act of worship which Christians have been celebrating ever since. The Words of Institution are recorded in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, and in Paul’s 1st Letter to the Corinthians.

But they are NOT recorded in John’s Gospel. At the Last Supper in **John’s** Gospel, Jesus does NOT say “This is my body; this is my blood.” Why not? What is John up to?

Let’s remember that John is writing his Gospel (the last of the 4 Gospels to be written) 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 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!

Now, when you think about it, what John is doing is ingenious: Knowing that the deep meaning and efficacy of the Eucharist cannot be limited to what happened at the Last Supper, but is rather something that embraces and interprets the **whole** of Jesus' life and love and ministry, John moves the Institution of the Eucharist, if you will, back in time into the very middle of Jesus' life and ministry among the people. For John, the multiplication of the loaves and fishes (which we read about last Sunday) **is** the Institution of the Eucharist: for it symbolizes and enacts the sharing and multiplying of his life among people in their daily lives.

For John, the multiplication of the loaves and fishes symbolizes and enacts the sharing and multiplying of Jesus' life among people in their daily lives.

Last week, we noted that, throughout John's Gospel, Jesus speaks to people on a symbolic and spiritual level, while his listeners hear him on a literal and physical level. Jesus speaks from the *spiritual* consciousness of the kingdom of God, and others **hear** him on the physical level only, from the consciousness of the kingdom of this world. And as we go through this 6th Chapter of John's Gospel, this will be a common thread: Jesus speaking on a symbolic and spiritual level, while others are hearing him on a literal and physical level.

Today's Gospel begins shortly *after* the multiplication of the loaves and fishes. Jesus has come to Capernaum, and the crowd tracks him down, "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 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"* – food that *endures*, in contrast to the manna which God gave Moses and the people of Israel in the wilderness, which lasted only a day before it would spoil. John wants us readers to understand this contrast: God gave Moses and the people of Israel perishable, *physical* food – manna – to sustain their *physical* bodies during their 40 years of wandering in the desert. And the crowd in today's Gospel thinks that what Jesus did in multiplying the loaves and fishes is the same thing: physical food to sustain their physical bodies.

But Jesus wants to re-direct their consciousness, so that they might see that the multiplication of the loaves and fishes was not simply physical food to fill their bellies; it was also *spiritual* food to fill their souls: Eucharistic food, if you will. Sacramental bread. "[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." And what is it that has come

down from heaven to give life to the world? Jesus himself. The word became flesh, full of grace and truth, as John says at the beginning of his Gospel.

But the crowd, still stuck in the consciousness of this physical world (as I am, most of the time – and perhaps you, also), is still thinking that what Jesus is talking about is an endless supply of physical bread, like the unending supply of manna which God gave Moses and the Israelites throughout their 40 years in the desert. “Sir, give us this bread always,” the crowd asks.

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.” Now, **all** of us become hungry and thirsty from time to time, so Jesus must be talking about something *more* than **physical** food. When Jesus says, “I am the bread of life,” John wants us to hear, “This is my body, given for you.” The bread of life is not limited to the Last Supper, but is given in the very midst of our day-in, day-out lives.

My friends, I think that you and I tend to be much like that crowd, steeped in the consciousness that sees everything in physical, material terms. This past week, when I read that the Federal Reserve Board had issued a statement saying, “With progress on vaccinations and strong policy support, indicators of economic activity and employment have continued to strengthen,” something within me breathed a sigh of relief. For you see, I – and I think most of us – tend to unconsciously gauge the state of the world by the state of our economy. If the stock market is doing well, then things are going well in the world. If we have our daily bread (and a *little* more, God, if you don’t mind), then we are satisfied. But a rising stock market is no indication of our *spiritual* state, either as individuals or as a society. Like the crowd in today’s Gospel, we *forget* 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, 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?’... 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)

“This is my body, given for you.” “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry...” My friends, in a few minutes, when we come forward to receive the body of Christ, may it multiply within us, feeding our souls with spiritual food, that we might become bread for the life of the world.

AMEN

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