

“The Bread of Life”

John 6:1-14, Lent 4

March 21 - 22, 2009

In the name of the Father of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

After God had delivered the children of Israel from their slavery to the Egyptians, they traveled in the wilderness for 40 years. In this barren wasteland they would've soon died, except that God miraculously provided food for them, bread from heaven. Each morning when they awoke they found a small round substance, as fine as frost on the ground. This thin bread they called manna. By it God sustained them until they entered the Promised Land.

Here in this sixth chapter of John, Jesus compares Himself to manna and says that it was a sign of His coming. “I am the Bread of Life, (6:35)” Jesus proclaims; and again, “I am the Living Bread which came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread that I shall give is My flesh, which I shall give for the life of the world (6:51).” Jesus Himself is the bread of God, which we feed on through faith, which nourishes and sustains us in this world, and which gives us to share in His eternal life in the Promised Land of heaven.

So when we hear of a miracle like the feeding of the 5000, in which Jesus multiplies bread for His followers, we know that the significance of this miracle goes beyond the earthly bread of that time and place. Ultimately, it has to do with Him who is the Living Bread which came down from heaven, Jesus Christ, and the Bread of Life which He continues to bless and distribute to us in the Sacrament of the Altar, His body and blood given for the life of the world.

It was Moses who led Israel during its 40-year journey. In this Gospel Jesus shows you that He is the New and Greater Moses, the eternal leader of God's baptized people. Just as Moses led the children of Israel through the Red Sea, so also John records that Jesus went across the Sea of Galilee (6:1), and a great multitude followed Him. **And why did they follow Him?** Because of His signs which He performed on those who were diseased (6:2), just as Moses had performed and announced great signs in Egypt, the 10 plagues. And just as Moses went up Mt. Sinai with the elders of Israel, and they saw God and ate and drank, so also Jesus here ascends a mountain with His disciples, and in Him the people would see God and eat and drink (6:3). Furthermore, it is written here that the Passover was near (6:4). In this way the Lord seeks to teach you that He is your greater Moses. He alone is the One who sustains and leads you safely across the wilderness of this fallen world through death into eternal life and the Promised Land.

Seeing the multitudes coming to Him, Jesus asks Philip a question to test him, **“Where shall we buy bread, that these may eat?”** Philip replies in hopelessness, **“Two hundred denarii worth of bread is not sufficient for them.”** In other words, “We couldn’t even come close to having enough money to feed this huge group of people.” Jesus asks this question to show you that the bread of life which He has to offer cannot be bought or bartered for. You can’t purchase this heavenly bread or pay for it. For God freely offers it to you in the ministry of His Word and Sacraments. His forgiveness and salvation are granted to you without cost. They cannot be earned or merited by your own goodness but must be received as a gift from Him. As Isaiah says, **“You who have no money, come, buy and eat (Isaiah 55:1).”**

Only those can receive the bread of life, then, who acknowledge their spiritual bankruptcy before God, who recognize that their worthiness doesn’t make them deserving of God’s eternal gifts. As Jesus said, **“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”** Those who try to **“buy”** their way into heaven, so to speak, bartering with their own works and spiritual qualifications, will not be given life from this Living Bread. For they seek a righteousness of their own. Only those who hunger and thirst for the righteousness of Christ will be satisfied.

So it is that the Scriptures say, **“Why do you spend money for what is not bread, and your wages for what does not satisfy (Isaiah 55:2)?”** In the pursuit of a full life and peace and happiness, you are tempted to invest yourself and your time and money in the things and the pleasures and the prestige of this world. But those things do not satisfy. In the end they leave you hollow and empty. Therefore, Jesus says, **“Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to everlasting life, which the Son of Man will give you(6:27).”** It is written, **“Seek the Lord while He may be found, call upon Him while He is near (Isaiah 55:6).”** For those who come to Him shall never hunger, and those who believe in Him shall never thirst.

One of Jesus’ disciples, Andrew, said to Him, **“There is a lad here who has five barley loaves and two small fish, but what are they among so many?”** On the surface it appeared that this bread and fish would be useless to help feed the people. But with Jesus it was more than enough to do the job. So it is in the Sacrament of the Altar. Someone might ask, **“What good can a little bread and wine do? How can these elements help my soul or give me any eternal blessings?”** But with Jesus, such elements are more than enough. For what counts is not the impressiveness of bread and wine but the miracle that our Lord is able and has promised to do with them. You must focus not on the elements only but also on the Lord who stands behind them with His gracious power.

“Then Jesus said, ‘Make the people sit down.’ Now there was much grass in the place.” The Lord bids you also to do the same today, for the Psalm says, **“The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures.”** The grassy pasture

in which the Lord makes you sit is this very place. For it is here that He calls you to come to Him for rest. It is here that He leads you beside the still waters of His living Word. And it is here that He prepares a table before you, spread for you with heavenly food.

“And Jesus took the loaves, and when He had given thanks He distributed them to the disciples, and the disciples to those sitting down; and likewise of the fish, as much as they wanted.” Here is the great miracle, that as the disciples handed out this food given them by Christ, there was always more and more. The more they handed out, the more there was. First there were five loaves in the basket. Then, as this was distributed, the disciples would reach in and find more and more loaves ready to be given out. And likewise with the fish. Thousands upon thousands of people were fed, and the food never ran out. In fact everyone had as much as they wanted. They were thoroughly filled. By His loving power, the Lord had multiplied the bread and fish so that all the multitude would be fed.

Is this not also how it is with the gifts that Christ gives in Holy Communion? In bread and wine He multiplies His body and blood, and through His ministers He distributes them to His people, that you may receive all that you want of Him who is the Living Bread from heaven, and that your souls may be thoroughly satisfied. There is always more and more of this Bread of Life to be given out. For Christ’s gifts of life and forgiveness are limitless and eternal. Our Lord’s love is ever-expansive. The more that He gives, the more that He has yet to give. So when you come to the Lord’s table in penitence and faith, you need never fear that the sin you bring is greater than the Lord’s forgiveness. For His mercy is without measure. When you receive the Living Bread from heaven in the Sacrament, you receive the fullness of Christ’s life and pardon, all that you could ever need or want. And there is still more even beyond that. For you cannot put a boundary around our Lord’s love. It never fails, it never runs out. There is always more.

This is so because the gifts of Christ are distributed to you from His holy cross, which is an everlasting storehouse of love and life. For it was there that the Passover Lamb of God was sacrificed to take away the sins of the world. Jesus said, **“The bread that I shall give is my flesh, which I shall give for the life of the world (6:51).”** As the eternal Son of God offered up His own flesh and blood on Calvary, He won for you eternal salvation, forgiveness without limit, and life without measure. There’s no confining these gifts of Christ. The Bread of Life continues to come to you in abundance from the cross, delivered to you in the blessed supper of our Lord. What you are given at the altar is nothing other than this living body and blood of Christ that was offered up for you on the cross and raised on the third day. Therefore, Jesus said, **“Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is food indeed, and My blood is drink indeed(6:54-55).”** Truly, Jesus is the Living Bread from heaven, come down to you from above.

Finally, when the disciples gathered up what remained, they filled twelve baskets with the fragments of the five barley loaves. Five loaves became twelve baskets. Five is the number of the Law, for there are five books of Moses. Twelve is the number of the apostles, for Christ chose twelve men to follow Him. From this miracle, then, we learn that Christ has fulfilled the Law and has formed a New Israel, the Church. Christ's Church is founded not on the Law of Moses but on the doctrine and ministry of His apostles, as we say in the Creed, **"one holy Christian and apostolic Church."** So it is that we hear the following description of those who were baptized on Pentecost Day: **"They continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers (Acts 2:42)."** This is the meaning of the five becoming twelve: that, having been freed by Christ from the judgment of the Law, you also are to continue steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking and receiving of the Bread of Life, and in the prayers and liturgy of the church. For this is your life.

Brothers and sisters of Christ, the feeding of the 5000 is not only a temporary, one-time miracle. It is an eternal miracle that is still going on in the Church, for you. God grant you ever to receive Him who is the manna from above and to be filled with His life.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.