

Commentary to the Seventeenth Sunday: John 6



Part 1 and the

First Supper This Sunday we begin a five week focus on the 6th chapter of the Gospel of John. We do this every three years, just as we repeat all the Sunday readings every three years. That the Church should spend five weeks on John 6 demonstrates that this is one of the most important sections of the Gospels. The Gospel of John was most likely the last Gospel completed, with the finishing touches being applied at the end of the first century. By then the primitive Church had developed a deep understanding of the Eucharist. This understanding is inspired by the Holy Spirit, as all scripture is inspired. The actions, discussions and even debates presented in John 6 reveal the depths of the Lord's Gift of Himself to us in the Eucharist and on the Cross, two aspects of the same salvific event. John 6 begins with the multiplications of the loaves and fish, our Gospel for this Sunday. Why is this miracle retold so often in the Gospels? There are two accounts of the multiplication in Matthew and Mark, one in Luke and one in John. In each passage phrases are used that are repeated at the Last Supper.

"He took, He blessed, He broke." Each passage refers to God's continual gift of the one food we need, the Eucharist. Three elements are emphasized in John's account of the multiplication to provide a

deeper understanding of the Eucharist. These elements are the time of the multiplication, references to Psalm 23, and the gathering of the fragments that are left over. The Gospel of John places the multiplication of the loaves and fish at the time of the Passover. This isn't just a passing note. The Passover was the sacred meal of the Jews celebrating their freedom from slavery in Egypt and thanking God for His continual protection. In today's Gospel Jesus provided a meal at the Passover time. He would provide another meal during another Passover.

Holy Thursday took place at the time of the celebration of the Passover. The Last Supper was really the First Supper of the new People of God. The food would no longer be the Passover lamb, but the Lamb of God. The people would eat the Body and Blood of the Lord. It would be a meal of deliverance from slavery, slavery to the devil, slavery to sin. It would be a meal that would provide freedom. It would be a meal that would celebrate the New Life of the Lord. So, from the very start of today's Gospel, we know that John is speaking about more than loaves and fish. He is speaking about the meal of the Christian Community, the Eucharist. There are many references to Psalm 23 in this account of the multiplication of the loaves and fish. You all know it: The Lord is my shepherd. There is nothing that I want. He leads me to green pastures, to safe waters. He restores my strength. He guides me along the right path for his names sake. Though I walk in the dark valley, I fear no evil.

Your rod and your staff give me courage. You set a table before me, and my enemies watch. You anoint my head with oil, my cup overflows. Only goodness and love follow me all the days of my life and I shall live in the house of the Lord forever. In today's Gospel Jesus sees the needs of the people. He has them recline on the green grass, green pastures if you will. He restores their strength with his food. This is not just about loaves and fish. Jesus is performing a prophetic action. He provides the banquet Psalm 23 spoke of, the Banquet of the Lord. Those who eat this food will continue to eat it in the House of the Lord forever. When we receive communion, we share in the meal of the Kingdom of God. We are united to people throughout the world and throughout time who also share in this meal.

Picture yourself at table on Thanksgiving Day. Around the table are all your loved ones, including those who have passed on to the Lord many years ago. This is the Banquet of the Lord we share every time we receive communion. The third element that John emphasizes in this account of the multiplication is the recovery of the fragments that are left over. Back in the days of the exodus from Egypt, the food that the people had brought with them ran out. They called upon Moses to give them food. He prayed to God, and God provided manna. When the people of Israel gathered the manna in the desert, they were told not to take more than they needed.

And the left over manna was not to be stored. Jesus does the opposite. He tells his disciples to gather up the remains. Enough is left over to fill twelve baskets. Twelve is not a random number. There were 12 patriarchs, the sons of Jacob. There would be 12 apostles, the patriarchs of the New Testament. The

Lord tells them to care for the food He provides. This does not just refer to not wasting the bread. The Eucharist which is not consumed during the Christian banquet is not to be thrown out. It is the Body of the Lord. It is to be saved for those who were not able to be present at His meal so they also can partake of his food. What we have here is the biblical basis for the preservation of the Eucharist in our tabernacles.

The Eucharist is stored so those who cannot attend the feast might still receive the Lord's Body. It is kept in our tabernacles for them. It is also kept in the tabernacle for all of us to reverence this special presence of the Lord. We do this every time we come into Church and genuflect, and pray before the Blessed Sacrament. We do this when we expose the Blessed Sacrament, take it out of the tabernacle for a period of deep prayer before the Lord.

These three elements emphasized by John in his account of the multiplication, the Passover, the fulfillment of Psalm 23, and the preservation of the fragments, remind us that God has provided a meal that is far greater than we could ever hope for, or even ever imagine. How great is our God? God is so great that he has found a way for all of us to attend the eternal Passover. How great is our God? God is so great that he leads us into his presence and feeds us his meal. How great is our God? He is so great that he has found a way for each of us to join the disciples at the Last Supper, or what is really the First Supper, the First Supper of the Kingdom. How great is our God? He is so great that He has created billions and billions of people in the world, and, yet, has found a way to treat each person as an only child. How great is our God? He is so great that He loves every person here as though each of us were the only person He ever created.

When we receive communion, we are present at the Last Supper, the First Supper, the Banquet of the Lord. When we receive communion we enter into the intimate union with God that Jesus came to earth to provide. How much our God cares for us! He has found a way to nourish our spiritual lives.

His very Body and Blood keeps us strong. He gives us the strength to proclaim his Kingdom. We need to ask ourselves at communion time: "What am I doing?" Am I just following the crowd? Hopefully not. Am I receiving some sort of blessing? Hopefully, we realize that communion is much more than a blessing. What is it that I am doing when I receive communion? I am receiving the Food that God provides. Today we pray for a deeper appreciation, a deeper reverence for the great gift of Love that is the Eucharist.

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