

17th Sunday of Ordinary Time “What Do You Hunger for Most?”

Fr. Frank Schuster

My friends, the Church will be spending the next five Sundays this summer focusing on John chapter 6 and it kicks off this weekend. It may be worthwhile to simply sit and pray with this famous chapter from the Gospel of John sometime this coming week. John gives us the entirety of the 6th chapter of his Gospel to expound on the theology of the Eucharist in a way unparalleled in the New Testament. Like I said, we get five weekends to focus on this chapter, and it all begins this weekend with our Gospel reading recounting the miraculous story of the multiplication of the loaves and fish.

The story begins, as you remember, with the crowd following Jesus and the disciples to a deserted place. A very practical problem was unfolding, how are we going to feed all these people. They were in a deserted place and the people are hungry. My friends, life can feel like that deserted place sometimes, don't you think, a place where we find ourselves hungry. Ask yourself, what do you hunger for most in this life? And I am not talking about pizza. No, I am talking spiritually now. What do you hunger for most in this life? Think about this as we continue. As a people on a pilgrim journey together as church, what do we hunger for most?

The story continues...all we have are some loaves and some fish. Of course, many homilists over the years have been tempted to reduce this story to a message of everyone sharing the food that they brought with them. As in, Jesus' public blessing of the meager offering of the boy encouraged everyone to open their knapsacks and share with the people around them. That is why there was so much left over, the theory goes. And don't get me wrong, it is intriguing interpretation to consider. It is, after all, good to share our food with those who are hungry, something we do very well as Church. But this wasn't the message John was trying to communicate at the outset of his 6th chapter. John points out a truly miraculous sign that Jesus performed. A sign that points to a simple and yet powerful statement: God's grace is superabundant. That is something you would hear from Bishop Barron sometimes regarding this chapter in John. It speaks to God's grace as superabundant.

You see, there are several moments in the Gospel reading that are easy to overlook that unlock for us the deeper spiritual meaning of this passage and set the context for the rest of the 6th chapter. So, let's have a little bible study together. For starters, the chapter begins with Jesus going across the Sea of Galilee and a large crowd following him. For John's community, these opening lines of the chapter have a deeper spiritual meaning because a relationship with Jesus begins with the Sacrament of Baptism, following John chapter 3. Following Jesus across the Sea of Galilee also calls to mind the Hebrews following Moses across the Red Sea. We follow Jesus through the waters of Baptism to the Promised Land. With that in mind, what happens next?

The Gospel says Jesus went up on the mountain. Again, we are dealing with a symbol because there aren't any mountains near the Sea of Galilee, there are rolling hills. John calls one of these hills "a mountain" because mountains are places where heaven and earth touch. You can't get closer to heaven than on a mountain. The meaning of this symbol is that we can't get closer to heaven than Jesus. In the person of Jesus, heaven and earth touch. Again, this has an important implication regarding our baptism in Jesus Christ. Our connection to Jesus leads us to a place where we can touch heaven.

Next, John tells us the Jewish feast of Passover was near. Ask yourself, when does Jesus die for our sins? During the feast of Passover, of course, so everything that follows in this chapter needs to be understood in terms of Jesus' passion, death and resurrection. One of the titles for Jesus in the Gospel of John is the "lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world". That is a reference to Passover. The miraculous sign that is about to happen in this Gospel reading, and the conversation that follows in John chapter 6, needs to be understood in this context.

And so the question ensues about how to feed the crowd, which is the same question as: how does Jesus feed his followers after their baptism at that place where heaven and earth touch? Andrew points out a boy who had five loaves and two fish. John loves playing with numbers and these numbers unlock deeper meaning. The numbers five and two add up to seven, which in my mind makes me think of the number of days in a week. Seven days a week suggests the circle of time where we find ourselves in life. It suggests the human condition that we cannot escape from by ourselves.

By offering the blessing, Jesus becomes the eighth item in this picture in my mind. Eight is an important number for the early Christians. Christians worship on Sunday rather than Saturday because Jesus rose from the dead on the first day of the week. Early Christians understood Sunday as also being the eighth day, the day that celebrates eternal life, the day that never ends. As an aside, you can see a symbol that suspiciously looks like that eight in the scientific sign for eternity. You can see this symbol at work in the early Church as several baptismal fonts from that era are eight sided, such as at the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. Seven gifts from the earth are brought to Jesus in our Gospel story. Jesus is the eighth in that picture, and grace is superabundant and heavenly. Everyone has their fill and the leftovers are enough to fill twelve baskets, a number that calls to mind the twelve tribes of Israel but also calls to mind the twelve disciples who Jesus asks in the Gospel reading to do the gathering, evocative of the apostolic Church founded on the twelve apostles of the new covenant.

The meaning of the miraculous sign of Jesus multiplying the bread and fish for John seems to be: if we follow Jesus through the waters of baptism, we will be led to a place where heaven and earth touch in Jesus' person. Because this happens in context to the Passover (think Exodus) when we find ourselves in a deserted place in life, Jesus will feed us with bread from heaven that has the power to save. This bread is salvific because this bread comes from Jesus' person and is meant to be food for our journey through life as we make our pilgrimage to the eighth day, the day of salvation, the day never ends.

In our Gospel reading, when the people saw the sign Jesus had done, they said, "This is truly the Prophet, the one who is to come into the world." The Gospel reading concludes with the provocative statement, "Since Jesus knew that they were going to come and carry him off to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain alone." You see, Jesus was not interested in becoming a political ruler. Jesus was interested in becoming our savior and paschal lamb for the salvation of our souls. This concept was lost on the people who were fed that day.

Is this concept lost on us? Do we ever find ourselves too focused on earthly things rather than heavenly things? The earthly things we chase after turn to dust. We look to Jesus sometimes to solve our earthly wants, to fulfill our earthly desires and somehow make sense of our earthly politics. Jesus isn't interested in these things. Jesus is interested in satisfying our spiritual hunger. And the heavenly activities we pursue, like loving God and neighbor, and simple acts of kindness, have the uncanny ability to multiply that can produce an abundant harvest of grace in our lives that follow us to heaven.

The Gospel reading this weekend leaves us with the challenge, what are we hungry for? Remember that was the question I asked you at the beginning. What are you hungry for most in this life? Is there an empty place in our heart that needs filling? What concerns us most, earthly pursuits or heavenly pursuits? You see, as much as we hunger for God, God hungers more for you. Think about that for a moment. God hungers more for you. During mass, God's grace will again overflow for us. Simple gifts of the earth will be transformed into the Body and Blood of Jesus. Our earthly lives will be elevated to heaven if we understand the Eucharist correctly and try our best to receive worthily. For when we receive the Eucharist as citizens of the eighth day, no matter what deserted place we find ourselves, God has given us everything by giving us Jesus.