

18th Sunday of Ordinary Time “The Bread of Life Discourse Part 2”

Bishop Frank Schuster

Four years ago, I had a molar extracted. It is one of the least desirable ways to become “holy” by the way. It takes almost a year between the extraction and finally getting a new artificial “tooth”. I remember holding back laughter sitting there in the dentist office holding onto the armrests for dear life while getting something unnatural drilled into my jaw. It could have been the laughing gas, however, the thought that came to mind was, nothing on this planet is going to keep my entire body from being buried someday and that the only thing left of me after my body decomposes will be one lonely tooth implant. You see, we are all born in mystery, we learn about who we are and why we are here somewhat by braille, and we all know we have a date with death someday. And so, last week I asked us all the question, “what do we hunger for most in life”? The correct answer should be “salvation”, for us and for our loved ones. Thanks be to God, at some point in our lives it happens. A light shines in the darkness and we discover that this light is a person. His name is Jesus, and all creation came to be through him, including us. He alone makes sense of who we are, why we are here and where we are going, tooth implants and all. Most of you share this experience with me at some level because we are here together in this church to encounter Jesus, to give him worship as our savior and Lord. We are here because we hunger for Jesus in our lives. We hunger for him most of all.

This weekend we are in the second of the five Sundays dedicated to the Gospel of John chapter 6. To bring us up to speed, last week we kicked things off by recalling the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves and fish. Jesus “takes, breaks and gives” five barley loaves and a couple of fish and feeds the five thousand. What happened after Jesus performed this profound sign of divine love? It says that the people were so amazed they wanted to carry Jesus off and make him king. Jesus, knowing their hearts, flees. Why? The people didn’t get it! And that is where our Gospel reading begins today.

You must understand that the people in Jesus’ day wanted a savior. But not in the way God was going to deliver. The people wanted a new King David, a political messiah, someone who would liberate Israel from the Romans. On a more practical level though, Jesus gave them food to eat. And this is how politics worked in his day as it many times works in our present day, “He feeds our bellies, let’s make him king”. Jesus however did not want to be their political savior any more than he wants to be our political savior today. Jesus has a different agenda. The tyranny Jesus wants to liberate us from is not the Romans or any earthly power but our spiritual slavery to sin and death. So instead of sitting on the earthly throne the people were beginning to construct for him, Jesus goes back to his little house in Capernaum across the Sea of Galilee. And so, once more, the people follow Jesus across the Sea and the question we need to consider is the same as last weekend: What are we hungry for? There are three very important moments this weekend that must not be overlooked.

First, Jesus commands us to not work for food that perishes but for food that endures for eternal life. What does this mean? Let’s explore this by first asking another question: what motivates us to go to work each day? Think about that for a moment. What motivates you to go to work each day? Is it for the paycheck? Is it for nice things? Is it for the betterment of society?

Is it to provide a better life for your family? Let me begin by saying: all these motivations are not bad. In fact, they are very good. There is nothing wrong with working for a paycheck. There is nothing wrong with having nice things. There is nothing wrong in working for a better society. There is obviously nothing wrong with caring for family.

These are all good things, but at the end of the day, there is something ultimately nagging and wanting about these good things. If I buy something nice, that's great, but it will be old and outdated soon enough. If I work for the betterment of society, I can feel pretty good about that provided my motivation is in the right place. What do I mean by that? Let's take a quick poll, something I do from time to time: How many people here know who the president of the United States was 100 years ago (Calvin Coolidge)? How many people know who the Pope was 100 years ago (Pius XI). The question becomes: if few people can remember who the pope was 100 years ago, how many people are going to remember us 100 years from now, no matter what we accomplished for the betterment of society? This shouldn't stop us from wanting to better society, in fact to be a disciple of Jesus demands that we do so. The motivation though shouldn't be to get a plaque on the wall. Jesus commands us: don't work for food that perishes, work for food that endures for eternal life. This is the first challenge the Lord gives us that must not be overlooked in the Gospel.

This leads us to the second important moment that must not be overlooked in this weekend's Gospel reading. How do we accomplish works of God that endure for eternal life? Let's take parents who work to provide food and clothing for their family. If they do so because they love their family and children, this is a very good thing. But then, children eventually grow up and leave home. Precious few of us even know the names of our ancestors who lived a hundred years ago. This begs the question, a hundred years from now who will remember our names? But there is hope once we realize there is better question we could be asking: will they know Jesus? Will they know Jesus? You see, I never met my ancestors who lived a hundred years ago. I only know some of their names. But I nevertheless know them because of the faith they passed down to me over the generations. Follow? A hundred years from now, our descendants living on Earth might not know us personally, but they will nevertheless know us if we are successful inviting them into a relationship with Jesus. Meanwhile, even if the world should forget you, God will always know your name forever without end. Only in God can our relationships last forever.

Look! If you understand how a few hundred Christians 2000 years ago have now become over a billion Christians today, then you understand the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves and fish. You see, when we pass down our faith, we are working for food that will never perish. Every good thing we do for family or society done for the greater glory of God as our motivation produces fruit that will last. Jesus says, "This is the work of God: that you believe in the one he sent". This is work that produces eternal treasure.

This leads us to the most important moment that must not be overlooked in the Gospel reading today. Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me will never hunger, and whoever believes in me will never thirst." My friends, the Eucharist is the food that endures forever. The people listening to Jesus were still not getting it. "What sign can you do, that we may see and believe in you?"

There was a collective gasp. It was becoming clearer now that Jesus was not another earthly king who wanted a pyramid erected over his corpse. Jesus was not just another political leader promising to provide earthly bread to fill stomachs. Jesus is the heavenly king who established his throne on the cross for the sake of our salvation. Jesus is the divine king who loves us so much that he gives his very body and blood to us as food and drink, to become for us food for the journey that leads us to everlasting life. The people still don't understand when they ask Jesus, "Sir, give us this bread always". However, God has answered our prayers. In a few minutes, we will again receive Jesus Christ present in the Eucharist, the Bread of Angels that promises eternal life to those who know how to receive him. More on that topic next week as we enter deeper into the Bread of Life discourse of the sixth chapter of St. John. Stay tuned!