

Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)

July 29, 2012

Today we open a series of homilies on the Bread of Life discourse from chapter six of John's Gospel. The miracle just read to you conceals rich resources for our Catholic experience. Why did Jesus multiply "five barley loaves and a couple of dried fish" for more than five thousand? When Jesus saw the "great throng, he had compassion on them." That expression the Gospels echo all through Jesus' life: he had compassion. On the sick, a leper, two blind men, a father and his epileptic boy, a mother who had lost her only son, crowds that were "helpless like sheep without a shepherd."

But that is not the whole story – not even the most important part. The Gospel tells us that the disciples "did not understand about the loaves." Surely they had no trouble understanding Jesus' compassion. What, then, did they fail to understand? Let me try and explain.

As you know, the miracles of Jesus were handed down by word of mouth in the Christian communities. They were retold in the Sunday assemblies, meditated over, pondered, long before the Gospels were written as we have them now. As the story of the loaves and fishes was passed along, the Christian people were increasingly struck by an amazing resemblance. They grasped more and more clearly the connection of this miracle with a central Christian mystery. I mean the Eucharist. They began to see close parallels in gesture and wording between the multiplication of the loaves and the Last Supper. You know what the priest says and does when he consecrates the bread and feeds you with the body of Christ.

Now listen to what the Gospels say about the multiplication. Jesus "took the loaves and, looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and blessed them. He broke them, gave them to the disciples to set before the crowd. And they all ate and were satisfied. And he told the disciples to gather up the fragments left over by those who had been fed."

Now that multiplication was not the Eucharist. But the Gospels see the multiplication as a sign. It fulfilled the Old Testament promises that in the days to come God would feed God's people with plenty. And it looked forward to the Last Supper and all subsequent Suppers, when Christ would feed his sisters and brothers with the food that gives everlasting life, the food that is his own flesh and blood.

The function of Eucharist is to form a community, a body of women and men strikingly one in what we believe, in how we worship, in the way we act. St. Paul phrased it beautifully: "Because the Bread is one, we, though many, are one body; for we all partake of the one Bread." But our oneness is only a beginning. The Eucharist must move us from church to world, thrust us out to the hungers of the human family to love as Jesus loved.

I constantly brag of the resources, intellectual, material, spiritual, so much of them untapped, that lie within our Christ Our Hope community for changing the face of downtown Seattle. I cannot tell you what God expects of any of you. That you have to hear from the Master, from Christ. But this much I dare to say. All of you are people of faith. Many of you are people with power. Each of you must ask yourself what I have to ask myself. Where I work, where I spend my day, is that place different, better, more human and Christian, more "for others" because I am there?

When you receive Christ today in Eucharist, simply repeat the words of Paul knocked to the ground on the road to Damascus. Simply ask the Christ within you, "What shall I do, Lord?" What shall I do?

Paul A. Magnano

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