

Lent IV Laetare Sunday 2021

Jesus said, "Gather up the fragments that remain, that nothing be lost."

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

You've heard me say in other homilies and in Sunday school as well, that of the four Gospels, St. John's is the most theological. Whereas the Synoptics, Matthew, Mark, and Luke tell the stories of Our Lord's Birth, early years, and His miracles, John focuses more on the words of Jesus and the message behind his miracles. That is to say, as great as the miracle is, there is always a greater truth behind the physical occurrence.

The story of the Feeding of the Five Thousand is well-known with slightly varying versions appearing in all Four Gospels. Like all of Jesus' miracles, it is a teaching moment; instruction for his disciples as well as the crowds that were following him.

Jesus will teach his disciples a valuable lesson concerning faith and trust, and those listening to his words from the crowd, receive a foretaste of his Eucharistic discourse.

Our Lord and his disciples were tired, by this time, really exhausted. In fact, this little trip over the Sea of Galilee was meant to be a time of rest. Unfortunately the crowds are following the boats along the shoreline, so by the time He reaches the landing, a massive crowd has gathered, in John's account 5000. And remember, this is Passover, so you have a lot more folks coming into the area.

With the day drawing to a close, Jesus fears the crowd will not be able to find anything to eat, so He decides He will feed them.

Enter Philip and Andrew, two of his most trusted disciples. Bear in mind, these two have already seen Jesus change water into wine, heal a nobleman's son without even being present, and cure a paralytic. And those are just the miracles we know of. So what's the big deal about feeding this crowd?

Well, remember, the disciples are being trained; being prepared for ministry, but they have a long way to go. This is evident as he asks Philip to find food for the crowd whose basic response is, "You must be kidding. First of all, we don't have the money and even if we did, we're in the middle of nowhere."

And then Andrew chimes in, "We have five loaves of bread and two fish, but what good will that do?"

Like Philip, Andrew is focusing on what they don't have and that's a major mistake when it comes to matters of faith; a mistake that we often make.

In this instance it appears both disciples have failed the test. But it wouldn't be the last time for them and the others. It is all about doubt. We want to believe, they wanted to believe; but our worldly instincts tell us it is not possible. Giving in to God is not easy. But until we can, we'll never reach our full spiritual potential.

Today, with just five loaves and two fish, Jesus has fed thousands and even has twelve baskets left over. Did this change the minds of Philip and Andrew?

Probably not. After all, they had already witnessed bigger miracles than this.

But something much bigger is happening here. Jesus is setting the stage for his teaching on the Holy Eucharist.

As I always do when I preach on this Gospel passage, I encourage you to read the 6th Chapter of John in its entirety in order to set the proper context.

So the crowd has now been fed, but there are some leftovers. But notice, not just any leftovers, “fragments.” Our Lord says specifically, “Gather up the fragments that remain, that nothing be lost.” Why the concern over fragments or crumbs? Because there will be a time when these fragments will be more than mere bread. Beginning at the 48th verse, Our Lord is clear as He can be about the spiritual significance of these fragments. He says, “I am the bread of life. Whoso eateth my flesh and drinketh my blood hath eternal life and I will raise him up at the last day.”

As you and I read these words, we know exactly what they speak of. But imagine you were one of his disciples or just someone in the crowd, what would you think upon hearing such words?

After all, how is it possible to eat His Flesh and Drink his blood. John tells us that the disciples murmur amongst themselves, “who can hear this?” That is, it doesn’t make sense.

This was a hard teaching to hear. So hard in fact that we’re told that “many of his disciples no longer walked with him.”

This Gospel started with a test; a test of faith. The disciples were asked to believe that Jesus could feed thousands of people in the middle of nowhere with what was literally a child’s lunch.

Today, you and I are the benefactors of what began that day and would culminate on Maundy Thursday at the Last Supper.

Our Lord's words are clear, "Unless you eat my Body and drink my Blood, you have no life in you."

This is why we make a General Confession; it's why we say a Prayer of Humble Access; it's why we Fast before Communion; it's why we honor our Lord with Eucharistic Adoration and Benediction. And it's why our Prayer Book reminds that the Holy Communion strengthens and refreshes our very souls.

Of course, the spiritual benefit of this reception is God's grace; the grace that gives us the spiritual ability to face what lies beyond those doors.

In a matter of moments, ordinary bread and wine will be changed in an instant and will instantly change us.

As we continue, let us thank God for His gift of faith and the gift of himself in the Holy Communion.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.