

17th Sunday per Annum - B
II Kings 4:42-44;
Ephesians 4:1-6;
John 6:1-15
Little Flower - 7/28/24

My Brothers and Sisters,

Our readings at Sunday Mass are on a three-year cycle, each year focusing on a different Gospel. This year we are in Year B which focuses on Mark's Gospel, the shortest Gospel, which is only fifteen chapters long. Therefore, beginning this Sunday, the Church inserts four weeks of readings from the sixth chapter of John's Gospel.

The first part of the Gospel of John, from which today's Gospel comes, is often titled the *Book of Signs*. Typically, Jesus works a miracle and uses the miracle as a springboard for a lengthy discourse. The multiplication of the loaves and fish was Jesus' fourth sign and the springboard for his *Bread of Life* Discourse. With the National Eucharistic Congress having just ended, it is the perfect time to reflect on Jesus' *Bread of Life* Discourse.

We can look at the miracle of the multiplied loaves and fish on two different levels. On one level, we can read the story very literally. Jesus multiplied five barley loaves and two fish and fed five thousand men, not including women and children. However, some scholars pose an alternate understanding of the multiplication of the loaves and fish.

Some Scripture scholars argue that the people of Jesus' time, especially mothers with children, would never have gone on such a journey without food. Therefore, they suggest that perhaps the miracle of the loaves and fish was primarily a miracle of changed hearts. In other words, Jesus multiplied the loaves and fish by changing the hearts of people, causing everyone who had food to share with others. When all opened their hearts and shared with others, not only was everyone fed, but there were twelve baskets remaining.

Although I have always believed, and still believe, that Jesus literally multiplied the loaves and fish, perhaps both understandings are true: perhaps Jesus changed the hearts of those who followed him, and he multiplied what they shared in order to feed the five thousand men and the accompanying women and children.

In any case, the alternate understanding is challenging. First, we might ask which would be the greater miracle, multiplying loaves and fish or changing human hearts? Someone once wrote, "Prayer does not change things, it changes people and they change things." Second, the alternate understanding of the Gospel challenges us to ask ourselves, for example, how much food we waste when millions in our country and throughout the world do not have enough to eat.

It is very clear that the multiplication of the loaves and fish prefigures Jesus' gift of himself in the Eucharist. His words in this passage are almost identical to his words at the Last Supper: *Then Jesus took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed them*. In fact, in John's Gospel, the Greek word for *gave thanks* is *eucharistēsas*, from which our word *Eucharist* comes.

The Eucharist is also a two-dimensional miracle. First, Jesus changes bread and wine into his own body and blood. Second, when we celebrate and receive the Eucharist, Jesus transforms us into the Body of Christ called to pour out our lives in loving service of God and others. Again, we might ask which is the greater miracle, changing bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ or changing the hearts of people, making them one family willing to pour out their lives in service to others.

My brothers and sisters, we are a Eucharistic people. In today's second reading, Paul urges us to live in a manner worthy of our call. As a Eucharistic people, we are called to live in thanksgiving by celebrating Eucharist and sharing ourselves with others.