

## Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time: The Great Gift of the Eucharist

This Sunday we begin the deep dive into the Sixth chapter of the *Gospel of John*. This is the chapter on the Eucharist. *John 6* begins with the multiplication of the loaves and fish. What again? The multiplication of loaves and fish is the only Gospel miracle found in all four gospels and is actually found twice in the *Gospels of Mark and Matthew*. So, we come upon it quite frequently in our liturgies.

This Sunday's reference to the loaves and fish is an introduction to the gospel's teaching on the Bread of Life. Everything in this account has particular meaning. Jesus goes up a mountain to teach just as instructions from Moses and Elijah came from a mountain. The feast of Passover is near. Jesus provides physical food here, but on another feast of Passover he will provide the Bread of Life. Jesus has the people recline on the grass like the sheep led to verdant pastures in Psalm 23. After the people eat, Jesus has his disciples gather up the remnants of the bread. They fill up twelve wicker baskets. There were twelve tribes of Israel. There would be twelve apostles of the New Israel.

I want to focus in on the gathering of the fragments. Unlike the manna, the fragments were not to be thrown away. They came from God. This happens in our churches every time we celebrate Mass. Bread and wine are consecrated, not blessed, but consecrated. They become the Eucharist, the Body and the Blood of the Lord. Once the physical elements are transformed, they remain the Body and Blood of the Lord. We place the consecrated hosts in our tabernacles because this is still the Lord. We bring the Body of Christ to those who cannot join us at Mass. We pray before the Body of Christ in our tabernacles. The Eucharist is not merely a liturgical action during the Mass. It is Jesus. He is really present in the consecrated species, the bread and wine.

There are times that people will leave the Catholic Church for another non-Catholic denomination. If I am approached about this, I always tell them that they may have their reasons for leaving the Church, but they are leaving the Eucharist. At least as we understand the Eucharist as the Real Presence of the Lord. Many times these people will say, "No, they have communion services in this or that denomination." Yes, but that is not the real presence of the Body of Christ. These denominations celebrate a symbolic action of unity with each other and with the Lord, but they do not believe that the bread and wine themselves become the Body and Blood of the Lord. That is why they do not have tabernacles. There is no reason for them to save that which they only recognize as bread after the service. We respect their faith, but we also recognize that what we believe is different than what they believe. We believe that this is really and truly the Body and Blood of Christ. To leave the Catholic Church for another faith is to reject the gift of the real presence of Jesus Christ as Eucharist. Once a person is brought into the mystery of the Eucharist, that person cannot leave this mystery. It would be a rejection of a great Grace given when that person became Catholic or entered that stage of life when he or she could come to an understanding of the what we Catholic believe about the Eucharist.

How great is our God? God is so great that he has found a way for all of us to attend the eternal Passover. How great is our God? God is so great that he leads us into his presence and feeds us his meal. How great is our God? He is so great that he has found a way for each of us to join the disciples at the Last Supper, or what is really the First Supper, the First Supper of the Kingdom.

How great is our God? He is so great that He has created billions and billions of people in the world, and, yet, has found a way to treat each person as an only child. How great is our God? He is so great that He loves every person as though each of us were the only person He ever created.

When we receive communion, we are present at the Last Supper, the First Supper, the Banquet of the Lord. When we receive communion we enter into the intimate union with God that Jesus came to earth to provide.

How much our God cares for us! He has found a way to nourish our spiritual lives. His very Body and Blood keeps us strong. He gives us the strength to proclaim his Kingdom.

We need to ask ourselves at communion time: "What am I doing?" Am I just following the crowd? Hopefully not. Am I receiving some sort of blessing? Hopefully, we realize that communion is much more than a blessing. What is it that I am doing when I receive communion? I am receiving the Food that God provides. I am being nourished with the Body and Blood of Christ.

Today we pray for a deeper appreciation and a deeper reverence for the Great Gift of Love that is the Eucharist.