

17th Sunday per Annum - B
II Kings 4:42-44;
Ephesians 4:1-6;
John 6:1-15
Little Flower - 7/29/18

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. However, Mark's Gospel is the shortest Gospel, only fifteen chapters long. Therefore, beginning this Sunday, the Church inserts four weeks of readings from the sixth chapter of John's Gospel.

Today's Gospel recounts the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves and fish. In John's Gospel, Jesus' miracles are signs that set the stage for his most important teachings. In the sixth chapter of John's Gospel, Jesus presents his teaching on the Eucharist. Remember that John does not include the institution of the Eucharist in his account of the Last Supper but substitutes the washing of the feet. We are all familiar with today's miracle. Jesus multiplied five loaves and two fish, feeding five thousand men, not counting women and children. Because of Jesus' teaching on the Eucharist that followed, we can conclude that this miracle was intended to prefigure Jesus' gift of the Eucharist.

The greatness of the miracle can be seen by comparing the first reading and the Gospel. In today's first reading, the prophet Elisha had twenty barley loaves. His servant asked how they could feed one hundred people with twenty loaves. After they fed the people, there was some left over. In contrast, Jesus fed five thousand men, not counting women and children, with five barley loaves and two fish and still had twelve wicker baskets of fragments left over.

Because the Eucharist is so much part our lives as Catholics, I think we take the Eucharist for granted. If the miracle of the loaves and fish prefigured the Eucharist, if Jesus gave us the Eucharist and celebrated the first Eucharist himself, we should recognize that every Eucharist is a miracle. Jesus has extended the gift of the Eucharist in space and time to spiritually feed millions of people throughout the world since the Last Supper. In other words, at every Eucharist, Jesus works a new miracle, transforming bread and wine into his own body and blood. We know from surveys that today many Catholics no longer believe in Jesus' Real Presence in the Eucharist. They no longer believe in Jesus' Real Presence in the Eucharist because they no longer believe in the miracle of the Eucharist.

However, we can look at the miracle of the multiplied loaves and fish on two different levels. On one level, we can read the story literally. Jesus multiplied five barley loaves and two fish and fed everyone. This is what I have always believed. Some Scripture scholars pose an alternate understanding of the multiplication of the loaves and fish. They 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 Jesus multiplied the loaves and fish by changing the hearts of people, causing everyone who had food to share with others. Some Christians object to this interpretation. If Jesus did not multiply the loaves and fish physically, there was no miracle. However, what is the greater miracle—to physically multiply loaves and fish or to change the hearts of people? It seems to me that on one occasion when Jesus healed a paralyzed man, he suggested that forgiving the man's sins was a greater miracle than curing his paralysis.

My brothers and sisters, in his letter to the Ephesians, Paul encourages the Ephesians to strive to preserve the unity of the community and lists some of the elements of that unity: one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all. The Eucharist is the sacrament of unity. According to our traditional definition of sacraments, sacraments actually cause what they signify. The Eucharist, therefore, is not only a sign of our union with God and our unity with one another. It also deepens and strengthens that union and unity.