

## The Feeding of the Five Thousand and the Bread of Life

Proper 13, Year B, RCL. John 6:24-35. The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost. August 5, 2018. The Episcopal Shared Ministry of Our Saviour, Salem and Trinity, Alliance in the Diocese of Ohio. The Rev'd Jerome H. (Kip) Colegrove.

The thing I didn't talk about last week when Jesus was feeding all the folks who came to hear him and receive healing—feeding them by expanding some family's lunch to feed five thousand people—is that *this* is the way the Eucharist is introduced in the Gospel according to John. The Eucharist, or Holy Communion, is our most important ritual. John never talks about it directly. It has to have been part of the practice of the Christian community John was a part of, because we know the Eucharist was the keystone of Christian worship from the earliest days of the Church. One of many differences between John's Gospel and the other three—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—is that John leaves out the story of the institution of the Eucharist, where on the night before he died Jesus blessed bread, broke it, gave it to his disciples, and so on.

But something similar happened in the reading last week: Jesus blessed, broke and gave: those are the main actions of the Eucharist. The feeding of the five thousand stands as a Eucharistic act. Here's the key verse from last week: "Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish." (John 6:11, NRSV)

When we celebrate Holy Communion, we distribute bread and wine, not bread and fish, but you get the point. Jesus feeds God's people abundantly, and he feeds us in a way that relates to, but is not quite

the same as, an ordinary kind of meal.

Just what it is about the Eucharist that is not the same as the usual kind of meal is made clear in today's reading, which of course follows last week's passage in the Gospel according to John. Jesus reminds his disciples of the feeding of the five thousand and then says, "Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal." The bread stands for the grace of God, who is incarnate in Jesus himself, so that in a sense the two are the same thing. Jesus goes on to say to his disciples, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." Jesus will give us, through the operation of the Holy Spirit, the same kind of life that he has himself. We know this is what Jesus means when he says "I am the bread of life" because whenever Jesus says "I am" in the Gospel according to John he is saying something about his divine nature. "I Am" is the name of God Himself in the Hebrew tradition inherited by both Judaism and Christianity. "I am the bread of life," seen from this perspective, means "my life, taken into you, transforms you in the direction of complete holiness."

We celebrate, here at this altar, the complete holiness of God Almighty, given for us in the person of Jesus Christ. Everything we do as Christians is all about that. That is why the Holy Eucharist is our primary form of worship. It celebrates, it makes real, it communicates the transforming power of God himself, which is intended to turn us—to convert us, to transform us—into people who are holy, people who are Christ-like, people who do God's work in the world.

We must receive Jesus, we must take him into ourselves, before we can do this work as it should be done. Jesus' disciples said to him, "What must we do to perform the works of God?" Jesus answered

them, ‘This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.’” We call our worship “liturgy,” which comes from a Greek work that means “the work of the people,” in this case specifically the people of God. The Holy Eucharist is the work of God’s people *par excellence*, the highest form of worship, because in it we celebrate the taking into ourselves of the life of Christ, and we acknowledge that it is changing us, converting us, transforming us into his hearts and hands and voices in the world.

Here, not far from a great lake in the heart of North America, we find ourselves a long way from a grassy spot between the mountains and the sea where Jesus blessed, broke, and gave the bread of life. But it is not a long way from God, not a long way at all from the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. He is always as close as this [hold up two fingers virtually touching]; if we let him in—all the way into ourselves—he will give us the bread of life... always.