

Sunday before Advent 2023

In my collection of sermons of some 34 years plus, there are a number of favorites and from those favorites, there are some that I repeat nearly every year, often with a little editing. These few sermons discuss some of the things that just need to be re-emphasized. So it is with this particular Sunday as I take as my text from St. John's Gospel:

I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on me shall never thirst.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable in thy Sight, O Lord, my Strength and my Redeemer.

With this final Sunday in **Trinitytide**, the Church Year draws to a close. Next Sunday, we begin a new year in the Life of the Church and beginning the **First Sunday in Advent**, our focus turns with expectation to the **Coming of Christ**. Over the next four Sundays, we look forward to Christ's **Second-Coming**, even as we look to the past in celebration of his **First-Coming**. What better transition than the Gospel of John.

In today's Gospel from St. John, the beloved Apostle offers his recounting of the **Feeding of the Multitudes**.

But, as you may have noticed, my quote from St. John did not come from today's reading. It comes a little later in the chapter, verse 35, but provides the key to understanding the **Feeding of the Five Thousand**. That verse and more of the passage from St. John is printed on the back page of the bulletin for you to read which I hope you have.

It should not be strange that we close out the **Church Year** by focusing on the **Feeding of the Multitudes**. We have progressed through the liturgical year, beginning with **Advent** and the expectation not only of Christ's **First Coming** into the world, but also an expectation of his **Second Coming**.

We have been witness to his **Incarnation**, his **Manifestation**, his **Life and Ministry**, his **Passion, Crucifixion, Resurrection**, and **Ascension**. We celebrated the birth of the Church with the coming of the Holy Spirit on **Pentecost**.

Now, we draw to a close, and reflect on what has happened over this long year. We built up and up and up to that Easter Morn, and what followed has been a *dénouement*, a long climax extending to the end of the *Trinity Season*, the end of the Church Year, when our expectations are raised once again with **Advent**.

Indeed, there is a sense of anticipation: anticipation of the coming of the **Messiah**. But how will we recognize him? What will set him apart from all the rest?

If we were living as a Jew in Palestine just a little more than 2000 years ago, we would have a pretty good idea. We would recognize him by the **Breaking of Bread**.

What if you were there, part of the multitude that Jesus was feeding. What would you have thought when he took the bread, blessed it, broke it, and had his Disciples distribute it among the people?

You would have been taken aback. Could this be the Messiah we have looked and waited for? See how he is feeding us with bread. We might remember Moses, remember how our ancestors were fed in the wilderness with manna from heaven.

Thus, in the context of that time, perhaps, we can begin to understand what makes this particular miracle of our Lord so significant. So significant that it is repeated three times in our Gospel readings during the liturgical year: once in **Lent**, and twice in the *Season of Trinity*.

The story of the miraculous feeding of the multitudes appears in all four of the Gospels and is even told twice in St. Mark's Gospel; whether it is the same or several different occasions is irrelevant.

Now, perhaps, we can begin to see that the **Feeding of the Multitudes** was quite significant for the early Christians, and our first step is to recognize the passage in the same context as they did — a recognition of the Messiah by that one simple action: the **Breaking of Bread**.

The next step for us is to see as they would come to see, that the **Feeding of the Multitudes** prefigured the institution of the **Holy Eucharist**, or **Lord's Supper**, what we commonly refer to as **Holy Communion**, instituted by Jesus on the night in which he was betrayed.

St. Paul refers to this **Communion** as the **Breaking of Bread**, and it was the focus of early Christian worship.

Fully comprehending the sacrificial aspects of religious ritual, the early Christians appeared to grasp the meaning of **Bread** in the context of the *Discourse on the Bread of Life* that is given in the latter part of the 6th chapter of John's Gospel.

First of all, they understood that *bread* sustains life. It was more relevant for them than that it is for us today, as *bread* itself has been relegated to a lower status in sustaining daily life. Then, it was essential, and they could make the connection.

The connection they were able to make was that there was not only a *physical existence*, but more importantly, there was also *spiritual life*.

This *spiritual life* was a new relationship with God, made possible by Jesus Christ.

They had come to understand that Jesus Christ was the *way* to a *spiritual life*, not just the *way*, but also the **Giver** of life, the **Sustainer** of life, in that new relationship with God.

Since *bread* is the staff of *physical existence*, then Jesus Christ is the **Bread of Life** in the fullness of the **Spiritual Life**. That **Spiritual Life** is the **Real Life**.

In the **Feeding of the Multitudes**, Jesus took *bread*; he blessed it and broke it and gave it to his Disciples to distribute. He fed the people.

Jesus would have used a blessing typical of every Jewish home:

*Blessed art Thou, O Lord, our God, who causest to come forth
bread from the earth.*

While they recognized him as the **Messiah** through his actions and were ready to seize him and proclaim him as an earthly **Messiah**, this he could not permit, and for his refusal to be their earthly king, many left him.

I am the bread of life,” he said. “He that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on me shall never thirst.

In the ancient sacrificial system, the sacrifice was offered up on the altar. A portion was consumed entirely by fire; a portion was reserved for the priests; and a portion was given back to the person making the sacrifice to be consumed.

In the heathen rituals, in the offering up on the altar, it was believed that whatever god to whom the sacrifice was offered consumed part of the sacrifice and entered into the remainder. Thus, the person making the sacrifice was consuming his god when partaking of the remaining sacrificial portion. For the heathen in their ritual, it was believed that when they consumed their portion of the sacrifice, their god was entering into them, and dwelling within them.

With that as a background, we now come to something wonderful and truly miraculous: it is Jesus Christ who offered himself up on the **Cross** as a **Sacrifice**, the **Bread of Life**, who we receive in the **Bread** and **Wine** consecrated on the **Altar** in the **Eucharist**.

His was a *self-offering* of love, to which we join ourselves in the **Eucharist**, as we, in turn, offer and present unto God *our selves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy, and living sacrifice....*

In the culmination of this act, we are fed with the **Bread of Life**, Jesus Christ having entered into the consecrated **Bread** and **Wine** in one of the *Holy Mysteries*, beyond our comprehension.

This **Bread of Life** is offered in **Love**, to be received in love.

In the **Eucharistic Sacrifice**, bread is taken, blessed, and broken, just as our Lord did in the *Feeding of the Multitudes*, and in the *Last Supper*. It is the hands of the priest, but it is Jesus Christ who feeds his people.

So, beloved in Christ, this is how we recognize the Messiah, our Lord and Saviour: through the **Breaking of Bread**. And that **Bread** is **Eternal Life**.

Jesus Christ is the **Real Messiah**, and the **True King**.

It is not enough just to recognize him as **King**. We must take him into our hearts, and set him up as **Ruler** of our lives, and let him govern and rule our souls.

Here we are today, awaiting the **Breaking of Bread**; here in our small church, seated before its **Altar**, where we will offer ourselves as *living sacrifices*, as he, at the same time, offers himself in a *heavenly Sacrifice*.

Here, now, this is our grassy hillside, this small church our grassy hillside; it is where our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ awaits us to feed us with the **Bread of Life**, to nourish us, and bring us into full communion with him, both here, and in the life to come.