

Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

August 18, 2024

“ . . . and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world.”

Some of you may be thinking to yourselves, “That Gospel reading sounded a lot like last week.” I’m happy that you were paying attention. A few of you might even have noticed that it sounded an awful lot like the Gospel Reading from the past TWO Sundays. If you were one of those people, you get a gold star for the day.

In fact we are in the fourth week of a five week stretch in which every Gospel passage comes from the sixth chapter of St. John’s Gospel. Scripture scholars call this the Bread of Life Discourse, a long passage in which Jesus states over and over and over again that he is the Bread of Life, the living bread that came down from heaven.

Those who heard Jesus say these strange words must have been completely perplexed. “What could he possibly be talking about?” they must have wondered to themselves. It’s likely that no one present (or maybe ever

in human history) had ever heard someone utter these kinds of outrageous things before. I can hear them now. “Moral teaching? Well, that makes perfect sense. Inspirational preaching? Sure. No problem. Parables? Those work. Jesus is really good at that. But this, this is something altogether different. Eat his flesh? Drink his blood? Did he just say what I think he said?”

We, of course, have the benefit of looking back with 2,000 years between us and Jesus making those statements. We have 2,000 years of the Catholic faith community growing in numbers and developing its identity, 2,000 years of trying to understand what being a disciple of Jesus means and what it means to gather around this table week after week. And so, maybe those words no longer shock us as they did those followers of Jesus two millennia ago, no longer make us wonder, “What in the world?”

But they should.

Maybe it’s because we feel that we know the “answer” to the question. We have been taught (and have come to believe in faith) that Jesus meant what he said, that he comes to us as real food in this sacred meal, he gives

himself to us in a tangible, intimate, and unique way. For us Catholics, this (and all Sacraments) are profound God-moments times when God pours forth his grace (that is, his life) on us, in us, and for us. This is serious stuff.

Eat his body? Drink his blood? Sure, we can get on board with that. No problem. But if only it were that easy.

You see, once we feel we know the “answer”, once we can articulate a simple sentence to reflect our understanding and our belief, we run the risk of falling into the trap of believing that it “stops there”. I believe that this is really Jesus coming to me through the gifts of his body and blood.

And yet, that’s really only the beginning, only the starting point. The profound mystery is that this Holy Sacrament can never be “summed up” in a few short words. In fact, it can never be explained away, or fully understood, or unpacked in its entirety. Not even a thousand lifetimes would be enough time to grasp the complete meaning of this most precious of gifts from our God to us.

One reason for this is that the “meaning” of Eucharist is not simply restricted to what happens at this table.

Rather, one of the most profound realities of this Sacrament is what happens within each of us when we take this precious meal, within you and within me. You see, the Lord gives himself to us for a reason . . .

“ . . . and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world.”

God indeed gives us his very life, God gives his flesh for the life of the world. In other words, from his life (and in the giving of it) comes more life - life for you, life for me, life for all of his creation. In a very real sense, God has given us (and continues to give us) his all, his everything, his very life.

What then are we giving, my dear people of God?

My dear friends, so often we come here week after week to simply “get” something, come here to be on the receiving end of a God who wants all good things for us. Sometimes, we can fall into the pattern of becoming simply “takers” when it comes to this beautiful and Holy Sacrament, people who are more than happy to let God give what God wants to give. And then we wait and wait until our next opportunity to return to this holy place and

once again receive from this table the most precious of gifts - the Lord himself . . . until next week, and so on, and so on, and so on.

And yet, it seems that God doesn't want this just to be some kind of private moment we experience on Sunday. Rather, he wants to TRANSFORM us, he wants his life to create in us a newness of life. And then, he wants the most profound and challenging thing of all, he wants us to imitate him by giving OUR LIVES for the life of the world.

Not possible? Only if we don't believe it. But if we do, we might find ourselves no longer asking, "WHAT in the world?" but rather, "WHO in the world does God want me to be?"

Short Story

A little girl was ill in hospital with a rare blood disorder and was badly in need of a blood donor but a match could not be found. As a last resort, her six year old brother was checked as a match and much to everyone's relief, he was. Both his mother and the Doctor sat the little boy down and explained how they would like his blood to help his sister so she would not die. The little boy waited a few moments then asked if he could think about it. It

wasn't the reaction the mother or Doctor expected but they agreed. The following day the little boy sat in front of the Doctor with his mother and said he agreed to give his sister what she needed. The hospital staff moved quickly for his sister was fading quite fast. So the little boy could understand what was happening, he was placed in a bed next to his sister and so the transfusion began. Quickly, the color and life began flooding back into the little girl and every one was over joyed. The little boy turned to the Doctor and quietly asked, "How long will it be before I die?" the little boy thought that by giving his blood, he was giving his own life.