

## 17<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time – 2021 B

I don't know where Baal-Shalishah was ... somewhere considerably east of Foley, I am sure. And we don't know the name of the young boy whose food becomes the center of this story. It might have been Levi, or Simon, or Benjamin. He was likely sent by his mother with some bread and fish to make a little extra money for their family by selling these meager provisions if he could, and this large crowd looked like a seller's market. The barley loaves he carried were the food of the poor, not the wheat those better off could afford; and though we might picture loaves like French bread, each was probably about the size of a pita. And the two fish were not like salmon or northerns, but more like herring or sardines. But by any measure, Andrew was right ... this was not enough even for the Twelve, much less a vast crowd.

Unlike the other Gospels, John does not talk about the Eucharist at the Last Supper; rather, his focus on Holy Thursday is the washing of the feet. Chapter 6, which we will hear unfold over the next few weekends, is where John records Jesus's discourse on the Bread of Life, His own Body still given without fail across all these centuries to feed us. This miracle leads so clearly to the Eucharist: Passover is approaching, and the crowds would think of Moses and of the manna with which God fed His people in the desert; and of the Paschal Lamb whose blood set their ancestors free. Five loaves suggest the five books of the Torah, the Word that fed God's people; and the twelve baskets hint at the Twelve Tribes of Israel. Those with sharper memories maybe even remembered Elisha and the man from Baal-Shalishah.

Though this is the only miracle included in all four Gospels, John provides details the others do not. The food comes originally from that young boy ... just as the youngest member of the family was charged each year with introducing the Passover story in the household's celebration. Tradition suggests that John was that youngest member of the Twelve, so here he is announcing the new Passover Jesus was to bring. As barley was the first crop to ripen, so Jesus is gathering the first fruits of His followers. And afterward, Jesus flees to the mountain alone, rather than be made king, because the last time Israel insisted on having

a ruler to be like the other nations it eventually led them into exile. As God said to the prophet Samuel: “It is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected Me as their King.” All of this foreshadows Jesus, alone on the Cross on the mount of Calvary, mocked as the King of the Jews. And finally, the fish and bread will make another appearance at the end of John’s Gospel, when the disciples do not at first recognize the risen Jesus but come to know Him when He feeds them with the same meal.

You will hear much more about the Bread of Life over the next few Sundays from better homilists than I. But today, I suggest just two ideas for reflection. First, *this young boy had what was needed for a miracle to occur*. God provides, but often through unexpected human participants. It is a classic lesson in stewardship: to offer what we have to Jesus, even if it seems utterly insufficient, for in His hands it becomes more than enough. We can look at the needs of our lives and our world and then at our resources and understand perfectly Andrew’s words: “What good is that for so many? so many problems, so many hurts, so many questions?” We do not have enough; *but God does*. And as we make our small contribution of prayer and service, we have Mother Teresa’s words to guide us: “None of us can do everything, but all of us can do something.”

And second, though John doesn’t describe the moment, it must have been remarkable to see those lines of people coming for bread and each always found more; it just did not run out. So too is God’s love and mercy: *there is always more, it will simply never run out*. Today, that same divine love and mercy visits us and feeds us, and we experience a miracle far greater than the 5,000 who heard Jesus that afternoon. For today we receive, not a ration of earthly bread to tide us over until the next meal, but the very life of God so that we might live forever.