

The Eighteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time

(Year A)

<i>First Reading</i>	Isaiah 55:1-3
<i>Response</i>	Thou openest thy hand, thou satisfiest the desire of every living thing.
<i>Psalms</i>	Psalms 145:8-9, 15-16, 17-18
<i>Second Reading</i>	Romans 8:35, 37-39
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.’
<i>Gospel</i>	Matthew 14:13-21

The eighteenth Sunday in year A for Ordinary Time takes us to a very familiar story from the Gospel of Matthew. It's the story of the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand. This is one of the most famous miracles in the public ministry of Jesus. It's one of the most well known, precisely because it's the only miracle of Jesus that's recorded in all four Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. So because we're in year A, we're going to look at Matthew's account of the feeding of the five thousand in chapter 14, verses 13-21. And as usual, I'll read through the Gospel, and then I'll try to unpack it by looking at its Old Testament background. And I hope that in this video, I give you a fresh angle on the feeding of the five thousand, which has multiple, multiple levels of meaning in it. It's almost inexhaustible; there's so much going on here. So in Matthew 14, verse 13-21, we read these words:

Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a lonely place apart. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. As he went ashore he saw a great throng; and he had compassion on them, and healed their sick. When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, “This is a lonely place, and the day is now over; send the crowds away to go into the villages and buy food for themselves.” Jesus said, “They need not go away; you give them something to eat.” They said to him, “We have only five loaves here and two fish.” And he said, “Bring them here to me.” Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass; and

taking the five loaves and the two fish he looked up to heaven, and blessed, and broke and gave the loaves to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And they all ate and were satisfied. And they took up twelve baskets full of the broken pieces left over. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.¹

Alright, okay. So that's the feeding of the five thousand. We all know it well, I'm sure, but what's going on in this miracle? What's the deeper meaning? Well, just on the surface level, it should be pretty clear here that the feeding of the five thousand is like the other miracles of Jesus. It's a kind of visible and external sign of His invisible divine power. It shows us that Jesus isn't just a great preacher. He isn't just a great rabbi. He also has power over creation. He has the power to take the bread—these five loaves that are given to Him—and to multiply them in order to feed five thousand people. Actually, it's just five thousand men. So Matthew tells us not including women and children, so you can imagine a crowd of six, seven, maybe even eight thousand people.

Now, if you've ever tried to feed 50 people in your house—at a family gathering or something like that—you know that it's a lot of work. It's a lot of expense, and it takes a lot of effort. And in this case, Jesus is taking these loaves and He's giving them to five thousand—over five thousand—people. So this is clearly a miracle. It's a miracle of multiplication.

However, there is more here than meets the eye. And in order to see this, you have to kind of go back and put yourself in a first century Jewish context. If you would have been of the disciples, for example, present at the feeding of the five thousand, there were striking parallels between what Jesus here asked the disciples to do in the feeding of the five thousand and a very famous miracle from the Old Testament—a miracle of multiplication that was tied to the prophet Elisha.

So if you go back to the book of 2 Kings chapter 4, verse 42-44, the prophet Elisha—who, by the way, is the successor to Elijah. It's hard to hear the difference in

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

English. You'll sometimes hear one of them called Elisha and the other one Elijah, just to make them clearly distinguishable in English. The Hebrew is Eliyyah and Elisha (el-ee-shaw'), so you can kind of hear the accent a little bit differently there. I'll just say i-'lī-shə and I'll try to emphasize the *sh* there so that you know who we're talking about.

Elisha is the successor to the great prophet Elijah. And Elijah was known in the Old Testament—if you read it—for being one of the great miracle workers among the prophets. So sometimes when people read the Bible, they get the sense that everybody—especially in the Old Testament—that everyone's performing miracles all of the time. But that's not really the case actually. There are only a few prominent miracle workers in the Old Testament. Moses is definitely one of them. He had the miracles associated with the exodus from Egypt. And Elijah and Elisha—these two great prophets—are the other great miracle workers in the Old Testament. And so Elisha, who was the successor to Elijah, is unique because he gets a double portion of Elijah's spirit. And he carries out some pretty extraordinary miracles.

And one of those miracles involves multiplying loaves of bread so that a large number of people can eat them. Sound familiar? So let's listen to what 2 Kings chapter 4 says and keep the miracle of Jesus in mind as we do. So it says this:

A man came from Ba'al-shal'ishah, bringing the man of God [that's Elisha] bread of the first fruits, twenty loaves of barley, and fresh ears of grain in his sack. And Eli'sha said, "Give to the men, that they may eat." But his servant said, "How am I to set this before a hundred men?" So [Elisha] repeated, "Give them to the men, that they may eat, for thus says the Lord, 'They shall eat and have some left.'" So he set it before them. And they ate, and had some left, according to the word of the Lord.

That's 2 Kings 4:42-44. Alright, so you don't have to be a biblical scholar here to see the striking parallels between Elisha and Jesus—between the miracle of multiplication in the Old Testament and the miracle of multiplication in the New Testament. So on the one hand, Elisha takes twenty loaves of bread and multiplies them. In the New Testament, Jesus takes five loaves of bread and multiplies them.

In the Old Testament, Elisha takes those twenty loaves and multiplies them for a hundred men, whereas in the New Testament, Jesus takes the five loaves and multiplies them for five *thousand* men, not including women and children.

And then in both cases, you have some leftover. In the Old Testament, Elisha has some—it's not specified exactly how much is left over. But in the New Testament, Jesus in the Gospel here makes very clear that there are twelve baskets leftover from the fragments of the five loaves. So what's going on? What do these parallels reveal to us? What do they mean? What would they have meant to a first century Jew reading the Gospel of Matthew? Which remember, Matthew is written primarily for a Jewish audience.

And I think the answer to that is pretty straightforward, but it's actually quite significant. Namely this: that in the person of Jesus, the Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew, is not just the Son of David, the long-awaited Messiah. He's not just the Son of Abraham, the one who's going to fulfill the promise of the blessing of the nations. He's also a new Elisha, a new and greater Elisha. Because whereas Elisha multiplied twenty loaves and fed a hundred men, Jesus is going to multiply *fewer* loaves (five loaves) but feed *more* people. He's going to feed five thousand men, not including the women and the children.

So you see what's happening here? If you look, one of the themes of the Gospel of Matthew is the image of Jesus as the "greater than." So Jesus will say, for example, in the Gospel of Matthew chapter 12:

...something greater than the temple is here. (Matthew 12:6b)

So Jesus is a new temple. He's the dwelling place of God on Earth, but He's greater than the earthly temple of Solomon. And Jesus will also say:

...something greater than Solomon is here. (Matthew 12:42c)

So Jesus is a wise king, just like Solomon was a wise king, but He's a new and greater Solomon. And in the same way here—although Jesus doesn't say this—you could say something greater than Elisha is here. Because like the prophet Elisha,

Jesus multiplies the loaves and feeds the hungry multitude. But He's greater than Elisha, because He takes less food and feeds more people. So this is a sign of His prophetic identity that far surpasses the prophetic powers of Elisha—who, remember, himself, had more prophetic power of the spirit than his predecessor Elijah did. So this just...in a Jewish context, this miracle in particular would have been an extraordinary display of Jesus' unprecedented power over creation—His unprecedented power to feed the multitudes with miraculous bread.

Alright. So that's the basic context here. Now...what about the Old Testament readings for today? So if you go back to the Old Testament first reading for today, it's from the book of Isaiah chapter 55. And it's a short passage, but it's a really significant passage. So let's look at it, and we'll try to say what's the connection between this passage and the miracle of Jesus. So in Isaiah 55, we read these words:

“Ho, every one who thirsts,
 come to the waters;
and he who has no money,
 come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk
 without money and without price.
Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,
 and your labor for that which does not satisfy?
Hearken diligently to me, and eat what is good,
 and delight yourselves in fatness.
Incline your ear, and come to me;
 hear, that your soul may live;
and I will make with you an everlasting covenant,
 my steadfast, sure love for David.

Okay, so what's going on here in Isaiah 55? Well, even on a surface level, you see that this is a call from God to the people of Israel to come to this banquet of food and drink, which is free. Notice what He says:

come...

...[everyone] who has no money,
come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk
without money and without price.

Now this would have been extraordinary. In ancient times (as today), food and drink costs money, especially wine and milk. So this isn't just water. This is wine. Wine is expensive, even to this day. Wine is expensive. Milk can be expensive as well. So it's a banquet of free food and drink. And just as in ancient times, so today, you offer people food and drink, and they will come.

But as soon as you look at this, you'll notice there's something more going on here, because what God says to the people of Israel, as soon as He says that, He also makes clear that this isn't an earthly food and drink. It's not ordinary food and drink, because He says:

Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,
and your labor for that which does not satisfy?

Most of us spend a lot of our lives working for money in order to buy food and drink. So I have 5 kids. If you have a big family, and there are lots of people with bigger families than mine. It costs a lot of money to feed everyone. If you live in a religious community, where you have ten, twelve, thirteen, fourteen, fifteen...maybe fifty, sixty or more sisters or brothers. People eat! They got to eat. And so it costs money to take care of the needs of the body.

And yet what God is saying here is, "I've got free food, I've got food and drink...but I'm also making clear to you that you tend to labor for that which never satisfies." Because as soon as you eat, as soon as you drink, it's not going to be very long before you're hungry and thirsty again. So God says here:

Incline your ear, and come to me;
hear, that your soul may live...

Ah, so the food and drink that Isaiah is describing here is spiritual. It's supernatural food. It's supernatural drink that's going to satisfy the people of Israel. And it's fascinating here that in this last line, God says:

I will make with you an everlasting covenant,
my steadfast, sure love for David.

Okay, so what's going on here? Why in the midst of this banquet does God bring up David and the covenant? Well, the text doesn't tell us. It's not explicit about it. But if you know the Jewish Scriptures well, you'll know that the imagery of the covenant—which, by the way, is a sacred family bond. So when God enters into a covenant with the people of Israel, He enters into a sacred relationship with them, where they become His people and He becomes their God. He becomes the bridegroom, and they are the bride. It's a spiritual marriage between Israel and the Lord, the God of the universe and His creatures.

And one of the key signs of that covenant—if you go back to the Old Testament—is the Bread of the Presence. This is described in Exodus chapter 25. It's also described in Leviticus 24...I think it's Leviticus 24—make sure I get that right. Yes, that's right—Leviticus chapter 24, verses 1-8. And in Leviticus 1-8, the Bread of the Presence was an interesting sacrifice, because it was set out every week by the priests. But it would be offered by a flagon of wine, so it consisted of both bread and wine. It was an unbloody sacrifice. So it was a sacrifice, but it was not bloody. It was a bread and wine sacrifice.

And it's interesting, because in Leviticus 24, verse 8, it says this:

...Aaron shall set it in order before the Lord continually on behalf of the people of Israel as a covenant for ever.

A *berith olam* in Hebrew—an eternal covenant, an everlasting covenant. It's the same language that we see in Isaiah 55, verse 3, in the first reading for today. So when you hear about a banquet of supernatural food and drink that is somehow tied to an everlasting covenant...if you know the Old Testament well, you're going to

think of the bread and wine of the Presence that was placed in the tabernacle in the five books of Moses, in the books of Leviticus and Exodus.

So, with that in mind...in other words, what Isaiah is describing here is this feast of bread and wine that actually will satisfy and which will be tied to an everlasting covenant. So, again, you don't have to be a biblical scholar to see this. What does this point forward to? Well, in Isaiah, it's just talking about this future banquet of salvation, which I've mentioned before in other videos—the idea of the Messianic banquet. It comes from Isaiah chapter 25, where God speaks about a banquet of fine wine that He's going to give for all people, where He's actually going to swallow up death forever and take away His people's sins. And this Messianic banquet was something that the Jews in the first century AD, many Jews were waiting for as they were thinking about and hoping for the final coming of the Messiah, the inauguration of the age of the Messiah.

So in the book of Isaiah, this theme of the Messianic banquet begins in Isaiah 25, but many scholars think that Isaiah 55, verse 1-3 (the reading for today) is also a prophecy of the Messianic banquet. Although it's fascinating that in *this* prophecy, there's an echo—a direct echo—of the bread and wine of the Presence of God.

Okay, now...in a certain sense, this Old Testament prophecy points forward, of course, to the Last Supper. Because at the Last Supper, Jesus is going to take bread and He's going to take wine. He's going to identify with His own presence, with His body and with His blood. And He's going to say, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins”—exactly what Isaiah talks about in conjunction with the Messianic banquet in his prophecy in Isaiah 25.

But notice, Jesus will identify that wine with the new covenant in His blood in the Gospel of Luke and Paul...or just the covenant, which is going to be new because it is made with Jesus' blood. So He is, in essence, fulfilling the prophecy of the Messianic banquet of Isaiah at the Last Supper. But what the feeding of the five thousand is kind of like a bridge between the Old Testament Messianic banquet prophecies and the Last Supper.

So in a sense, the feeding of the five thousand points back to the Old Testament, back to the miracle of Elisha, back to the banquet that Isaiah talks about where God will feed the multitudes...and then also forward to the Last Supper, where Jesus will give the new Bread of the Presence and the new banquet of a new covenant in which He will give food and drink which will actually satisfy—not on a material level but will feed the souls of the disciples, because it will, as He says, “be poured out for the forgiveness of sins.”

So all of this banquet imagery is swirling around in the readings for today—very powerful, very important imagery. And so it’s not surprising when you turn to the Responsorial Psalm for today that links the Old Testament with the New Testament. It’s Psalm 145. And in Psalm 145, especially verses 15-16, the response focuses on God’s generosity in providing for the needs of His people. So in Psalm 145, this is verse 15-16. It’s speaking to God, and the psalmist says this:

The eyes of all look to thee,
and thou givest them their food in due season.
Thou openest thy hand,
thou satisfiest the desire of every living thing.

So notice...what the Psalm is emphasizing is the fact that everything that we have in this world—all of the food we eat—all of it is a gift from God. That’s how generous God is. He actually is so super abundantly generous that He provides for *all* of creation to eat and to drink what it needs to stay alive. He gives us our food in due season. There they also have the idea of certain foods—we’ve lost this in modern times, largely, but—in ancient times, they were very clear that certain foods only come in certain seasons. Harvest time...that’s one of the reasons harvests in the spring and harvests in the fall—those two harvest seasons were such times of joy, because certain foods would come in due season. And it’s a sign of God’s bounty, a sign of His provision.

So the Psalm for today is a psalm of thanksgiving, thanking God for the gift of food and for the gift of His generosity—how He opens His hands and satisfies the desires of every living thing. And so that bridge, that emphasis on the generosity of God, is the link between the Old Testament miracle—not miracle, sorry—the Old

Testament banquet that Isaiah describes of free food and drink, this banquet of salvation (the Messianic banquet) and then the sign of the Messianic banquet that Jesus Himself performed in the feeding of the five thousand.

Because remember, He gives the bread and loaves, He multiplies them—excuse me, the loaves and the fishes—to the people, and He doesn’t charge them anything. It’s a banquet of *free* food, of *free* bread...as much as you can eat. We’ve seen restaurants that advertise “all you can eat” but it always comes with a cost. Jesus says, “Here’s an all you can eat banquet. It’s free.” There’s no cost. There’s no money. It’s purely out of divine generosity.

And so, I’d like to end actually on that note of generosity. In other videos...I’ve done other videos on the feeding of the five thousand. Whether it’s in the Gospel of Luke or the Gospel of Mark or the Gospel of John, there are different versions and different accounts of the feeding of the five thousand. And in those videos, you might have heard me mention before an interpretation of this miracle that is rationalistic, that tends to deny the miraculous element. You’ll frequently hear this referred to as the interpretation of the feeding of the five thousand as a miracle of sharing. So as I detail in one of my other videos in a little more depth...in the 19th century, the theory was popularized that what actually happens in the feeding of the five thousand is not a true miracle. It’s not a nature miracle. Jesus doesn’t actually multiply the material. But what that actually happens is Jesus’ example moves the crowds to share their food with one another.

This was forwarded by a German scholar, Heinrich Eberhard Gottlob Paulus—H.E.G. Paulus if you want to write that down and impress people with your knowledge of that. Go ahead and share that with them. But Paulus was a rationalist. He didn’t believe that miracles were possible. But he still was a Christian, in the sense that he tried to follow the Gospel. He’s a rationalist Christian. So many people in this time period—especially in the 19th century—it was very popular to try to provide very natural explanations of the supernatural events recorded in the Gospel, as a way to kind of, shall we say, reducing the scandal of the miraculous...the stumbling block that is often presented for people when the Gospels depict these extraordinary events and say “this is what actually happened.”

So Paulus came up with this interpretation that all that actually happened was a miracle of sharing...that Jesus provides an example and then other people follow it. And in another video, I take that apart. I show why that is a false exegesis. It really is a false exegesis. It's a perfect example of what scholars call *Isa Jesus*, which is not drawing out the meaning from the text but reading something into the text that is not only not in the text but is at odds with what the passage actually says. And then if you look at this account in Matthew or if you look at John's, in particular, is really explicit with this, it's really clear here that the fragments of the twelve baskets that are filled are from the broken pieces. They're from the five loaves that Jesus Himself takes, breaks, blesses, and gives to the apostles. So there's no way for five loaves of bread to feed five thousand people, unless there's some kind of miracle of multiplication that takes place. So I go through that in another video.

However, I wanted to say—I wanted to end with in this video was to make a point, though, about the moral or the spiritual meaning of the miracle. So I've outlined some of the christological implications of the miracle, like what it reveals about Christ, what it reveals about His identity as the new Elisha. But I also think it's important to show that just because someone like Paulus came up with a false or rationalistic interpretation of the feeding of the five thousand as a miracle of sharing, it doesn't mean that there isn't a moral dimension that actually flows out of this miracle as well. These miracles have multiple levels of meaning.

And it's fascinating to note that if you look at John Chrysostom, who've I've mentioned before...John Chrysostom lived in the fourth century. He was the bishop of Constantinople. He was a very famous preacher and teacher in his day. His name Chrysostom actually means "golden mouth," because he was such a great preacher. He was called "John the golden mouth." He wrote a series of homilies on the Gospel of Matthew. And I think it's fascinating that if you look at Chrysostom's homily on the feeding of the five thousand in the Gospel of Matthew, he too points out that there is an element of sharing that takes place in this miracle.

Although unlike Paulus in the 19th century, Chrysostom doesn't reduce the miracle to sharing. But he sees it as a miraculous event that also—interesting, both/and—teaches the crowds to show one another charity by sharing. So listen to this; this is

interesting. This is the authentic, ancient Catholic version of the miracle of sharing. So these are the words of Chrysostom. He said this:

The Lord... wished not only for their bodies to be fed, but also for their souls to be taught... [B]y giving away nothing more but bread and fish, proposing the same food to everyone and sharing it, and by offering one no more than to another, the Lord was teaching humility, self-control, and love. He was also teaching to be equally well disposed to one another, and to hold all possessions in common...

Think here of the early Church in the book of Acts, where they shared their goods. They shared their possessions with one another.

The five loaves he broke and gave, and the five multiplied themselves in the hands of the disciples. And not even here does he stop the miracle, but he made them even to exceed; to exceed, not as whole loaves, but as fragments; to signify that of those loaves these were remains, and in order that the absent might learn what had been done. For this purpose indeed he suffered the multitudes to hunger, that no one might suppose what took place to be illusion.²

So that's from Chrysostom's *Homilies on Matthew*, 49th homily, section 3. So notice what Chrysostom does here. On the one hand, he actually says Jesus isn't just giving a divine display of power. He's also trying to teach the people something. He's trying to feed their souls. And by offering no more than one to another—he's offering them all an equal share—he's teaching them both humility, self-control, and charity. So he does set an example—this is important. Jesus does set an example of generosity and of charity in the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves, in the feeding of the five thousand.

It is a miracle of divine sharing or of divine generosity. However, at the same time—as soon as Chrysostom says this, unlike some modern commentators—at the same

² John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Matthew* 49.3; trans. D. H. Williams and *NPNF2*

time argues but it was still miraculous. So he doesn't put miracle in scare quotes. It's a real miracle, because the five loaves, as he said:

...multiplied themselves in the hands of the disciples.

And the reason Jesus allows there to be this surplus, these twelve baskets leftover, is so that everyone would realize that what happened was not—was *not*—an allusion.

So in closing then...as Catholics, we can say, following Chrysostom, that this is a miracle of sharing, but it's a miracle of sharing in which Jesus—in the feeding of the five thousand—not only reveals His identity as Messiah (author of the Messianic banquet), not only points forward to the Last Supper where He will give the food that will feed the souls of humanity, and not only as the new and greater Elisha....but also as the One who teaches us about the superabundant generosity of God. The One who made the universe does indeed give us our food in due season. He opens wide His hand to us and to all of creation. And in the Eucharist above all, He gives us the food that satisfies for eternal life.