

The Seventeenth Sunday of Ordinary Time

(Year B)

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| <i>First Reading</i> | 2 Kings 4:42-44 |
| <i>Response</i> | The hand of the Lord feeds us; he answers all our needs. |
| <i>Psalm</i> | Psalm 145:10-11, 15-16, 17-18 |
| <i>Second Reading</i> | Ephesians 4:1-6 |
| <i>Gospel Acclamation</i> | A great prophet has risen in our midst. God has visited his people. |
| <i>Gospel</i> | John 6:1-15 |

The 17th Sunday in Ordinary Time for Year B is a very significant Sunday because it marks an interruption in our semicontinuous reading through the Gospel of Mark and the insertion of a very important chapter from the Gospel of John, that is the famous chapter called the Bread of Life Discourse from John 6. If you've ever studied anything about the Eucharist you'll know that John 6 is one of the central passages in the entire Bible that teaches us about the reality and the mystery of Christ's presence in the Eucharist. So what the church does, this is very important, is during Year B she takes five weeks off from focusing on the Gospel of Mark and instead uses five Sundays in a row to walk step-by-step through the account of Jesus' actions in the sixth chapter of the Gospel of John, beginning with today's gospel which is the feeding of the 5000. So for the next five Sundays what I want you to do is just pay close attention to the significance of these Gospel readings and I think you'll see as we move through the next five Sundays why the church thinks that these passages are so important that every third year, when we're studying the Gospel of Mark, she interrupts that gospel to focus our attention on one of the foundational texts in the New Testament for our belief in the Eucharist, which is the source and the summit of the Christian life. Alright so just keep your eye out for that.

So today what we're going to do is turn then not to Mark but to John 6. The gospel for today is focused on the feeding of the 5000, the famous account of the multiplication of the loaves — which by the way is the only miracle of Jesus that is

actually recorded in all four gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Today we focus on John's account of the feeding of the 5000 with an eye toward how this is going to be fulfilled ultimately in the miracle of the Eucharist. So let's begin; the reading for today is John 6:1-15 — and a little bit longer than what we've seen in Mark but very significant. It says this:

After this Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, which is the Sea of Tiber'i-as. And a multitude followed him, because they saw the signs which he did on those who were diseased. Jesus went up into the hills, and there sat down with his disciples. Now the Passover, the feast of the Jews, was at hand. Lifting up his eyes, then, and seeing that a multitude was coming to him, Jesus said to Philip, "How are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?" This he said to test him, for he himself knew what he would do. Philip answered him, "Two hundred denarii would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little." One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, "There is a lad here who has five barley loaves and two fish; but what are they among so many?" Jesus said, "Make the people sit down." Now there was much grass in the place; so the men sat down, in number about five thousand. Jesus then took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. And when they had eaten their fill, he told his disciples, "Gather up the fragments left over, that nothing may be lost." So they gathered them up and filled twelve baskets with fragments from the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten. When the people saw the sign which he had done, they said, "This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world!" Perceiving then that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, Jesus withdrew again to the hills by himself.¹

Okay, awesome account there, the feeding of the 5000. If you're familiar with the other accounts in Matthew, Mark and Luke, one of things you're going to notice about John is that he gives several distinctive details. He gives you a lot more

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.

detail than the others and he tells you some aspects that aren't found in the Synoptics, almost as a kind of supplement to their account of this extraordinary action of Jesus. So let's walk through some of those distinctive elements of John's Gospel. Number one, notice John links this action to the signs of Jesus, that's one of John's distinctive terms. He doesn't call Jesus' miracles miracles, he calls them signs, because they are always meant to point beyond themselves to some other reality, whether it's Christ's own heavenly origin, his divinity, or, as many scholars have pointed out, whether they point beyond themselves to the sacraments that the church is going to give to us; in this case the sacrament of the Eucharist will be the one that this is pointing forward to. That's the first point.

A second point here is the echoes of the Old Testament. There are two echoes of the Old Testament in John's account. First, although the Revised Standard Version says Jesus went up into the hills, literally what the Greek says is that Jesus went up the mountain, singular, the mountain, *oros*, and that he did this at Passover time. Now if you're a Jew and you think about someone going up the mountain at Passover time and performing a miraculous act of feeding people with bread in the wilderness, well who are you going to think of? Moses obviously. So the second aspect of John's portrait of this account is that Jesus is highlighting the parallels between the season in which the miracle occurred, mainly the springtime at Passover, but also the parallels between Jesus' actions and Moses in the Old Testament. So Jesus throughout John 6, as we're going to see, is acting as not just the Messiah but as a new Moses. That's very important.

A third element here is just the origin of the miracle and the conundrum at which they found themselves. So Jesus poses a question to Philip, how are we going to buy bread so that these people can eat? And he knows what he's going to do but he's testing Philip. And John gives us this distinctive element, a kind of window into the discussion where Philip says 200 denarii would not buy enough bread for everyone to eat. Now a denarius in the First Century was a day's wage, like a common daily wage for a day laborer. So if you think about 200 days of your own wages, okay, how much money is that? That's a lot of money, right, it's not a full year salary but is still a substantial amount of money. And what Philip is saying is even that much money would not pay for anyone to even get a little. And if you've ever had a party at your house you know what Philip's talking about here. Try

feeding 50 people, right, so that they are all satisfied. Now change that to 5000 and think about how much that costs. That's just, it's mind-boggling really to imagine having to feed that size of a crowd, especially when — John doesn't say this but Matthew tells us that — that's just the men, that there are 5000 men plus women and children. So if it's more like 8000 people, basically it's impossible for these 12 guys and Jesus who don't carry food around with them, and who can never catch any fish right, to feed these crowds. So how are they going to do it? And I love this little distinct element that John gives us here, that Andrew says, hey here's this kid with some bread and fish why don't we steal his food and give it to everybody. I'm sorry, I think it's funny that Andrew points to this kid's food and suggests taking his. I'm sure the kid would've offered it or whatever, but it's just kind of funny. But it highlights the fact that all they've got is five loaves, five barley loaves note that, and two fish, but what are they amongst so many.

So now something important happens; Jesus says make the people sit down and then John, and John alone, tells you this interesting point, he says there was much grass in that place. Now why does he do that? Why does he tell you this? Well on the one hand, some scholars have suggested that this is one of the eyewitness details that you'll find characteristic of John's gospel. John will frequently say things that are kind of incidentals that reflect the kind of thing you might remember. Maybe you had a beautiful Easter gathering of family and friends and you remember how green the yard was or that there was lots of clovers in the yard that time. These are the kind of things that can stick out in our memory. It's springtime, so the fields in Galilee are lush, they are green, they are verdant, right, and John says there was much grass on the place so that people are able to sit down comfortably. This is a deliberate action on Jesus' part. I'm a professor; it's hard to get 25 students to sit down sometimes. Imagine trying to get 5000 people to all sit down. So this is going to take intentionality on the part of Jesus and the apostles to make the people all sit down. If you know your Old Testament, this action of Jesus should call to mind another Scripture from the Old Testament, one that we saw on the 16th Sunday in Ordinary Time, namely Psalm 23, right: the Lord is my shepherd I shall not want, he makes me recline, he makes me lie down in green pastures, or in verdant pastures. So in the Old Testament the Lord makes the people, his flock, to recline in green pastures. In the New Testament Jesus makes the people recline on the grass before he feeds them with the multiplication of the

loaves. So it's a subtle allusion to Psalm 23 and the divine shepherd of Psalm 23. So that's what Jesus is going to do here. He's going to make the crowd sit down so that he can act like a good shepherd and feed his flock.

Now the problem is of course he only has five loaves, but that's not a problem for Jesus in verse 11 because it says he took the loaves and when he had given thanks he distributed them to those who were seated. Alright, the Greek word there for giving thanks is *eucharistēsas* and we get obviously the word Eucharist from that, it means Thanksgiving. It's the traditional prayer before meals, we call it grace before meals as Catholics but the Jews would pray a prayer of thanksgiving before consuming any meal as a way of recognizing that all gifts come from God. In this case Jesus gives thanks before the meal. Now there are two Greek words for giving thanks, you can use *eulogēin* or *eucharistēsas*. John here picks *eucharistēsas* and most scholars think it is because he wants you to think about the Eucharist, about the Christian Eucharist. In other words, he wants you not just to look backward to the Passover of Moses in the Old Testament, but also forward to the Thanksgiving of the early Christian church, which especially in John's gospel isn't written until around 90 A.D. If it's one of the later Gospels written, the practice of the Eucharist would've already been firmly established in the church, and even referring to it as the Thanksgiving. We see evidence of that in other documents like the Didache, which I've mentioned in previous videos is an ancient Christian writing from the time of the apostolic fathers.

So Jesus gives thanks, *eucharistēsas*, right, he performs his thanksgiving and then he gives the bread to the people. Then it says when they'd eaten their fill he told the apostles to gather up the fragments so that nothing would be lost and when they take those fragments they fill up 12 baskets. Now in light of last Sunday's reading where we looked at the restoration of the 12 tribes of Israel, this should take on new significance, right. On the 16th Sunday in Ordinary Time the Gospel of Mark focuses on the apostles and Christ as the Shepherd Messiah uniting the 12 tribes of Israel. In this gospel, the 17th Sunday, when Jesus says gather up the fragments, on the one hand he doesn't want to waste anything but there is also a sign embedded in that. It's not a coincidence that they filled 12 baskets. The 12 baskets are themselves a sign of the restoration of the 12 tribes of Israel, they are a sign of Jesus' messianic identity and that he as the Shepherd Messiah is going to feed the

new Israel which is going to be his disciples, his followers, and those who recognize him to be the Messiah. That's the significance of the 12 baskets. Oh, one last point, notice too the language that they gathered up the fragments. In the Old Testament prophecies about the restoration of Israel, God says I'm going to gather my sheep, I'm going to gather the scattered flock. So in this case the bread itself actually represents Israel, it represents the scattered people and Christ comes to gather them together into this new Israel, represented by the 12 baskets.

Now with that said, another aspect of this verse that's very important is the fact that the verse in John's gospel makes clear that this is a miracle of multiplication. What do I mean? Well notice what John says there, that they filled the 12 baskets not just with any fragments of bread but with fragments that came from the five barley loaves that were left by those who had eaten. So I'm no mathematician but you can't get 12 baskets of bread from fragments of five barley loaves unless there's some miracle of multiplication, and this is how the church has always interpreted this verse, that Jesus takes the bread and miraculously multiplies it so that he's not only able to feed the people from the five loaves but that there is actually fragments left over from those five loaves. They all have their source in those original five loaves. So there's the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves, that's why it's interpreted as a miracle.

I just bring this up for two reasons. First, if you look at all four gospel accounts of the feeding of the 5000, it never explicitly narrates the miracle. It doesn't say "then Jesus multiplied the loaves" or it doesn't describe how the miracle happened. It's John's gospel that makes clear the miracle with this verse when it says that the fragments were gathered from the five barley loaves, okay. So this is the verse that makes clear the miracle of multiplication. The second reason I bring it up is because since the 19th century, a competing interpretation of this particular passage has become very popular in Europe and in the United States and in North America, in the West. And this interpretation, you've probably heard it before or at least you may have heard about it, argues that what is actually happening in the feeding of the 5000 is a miracle of sharing, okay. If you haven't heard of this interpretation let me just articulate it for a second.

According to this view, although most people think that this is a miracle of multiplication, what actually happened was a miracle of sharing. According to this view, what took place was that in the First Century A.D. supposedly Jewish people would carry loaves of bread and things like that with them on their person, in their garments or whatnot, and that when the crowd saw the willingness of the young boy to share his loaves and fish they were moved to be generous rather than selfish and to share their own food. So what happened was everyone ended up with enough to eat whenever people stopped being selfish and started to be generous. Everyone was inspired to generosity both by the model of the boy or also perhaps by Jesus' generosity as he began to share what the little boy had given. You'll frequently find that version of the miracle preached in contemporary European and American churches. What's the problem with that? Well it's completely unsound in terms of just exegesis, interpretation of the text. First and foremost, you'll notice we just read very carefully through the text. Did it say anything about Jewish people carrying bread in their garments? Did it say anything about the crowd being moved by the example of the boy? Did it say anything about them sharing their food? No, you have to read that totally into the text, it's called eisegesis. Scholars draw differences between eisegesis, which is where you read something into the text that's completely absent, and exegesis, where you draw out the meaning that's actually in the text. In this case, exegesis makes clear that Jesus here is performing a miracle of multiplication and that the 12 baskets being filled with fragments from the five loaves is in fact a miraculous multiplication, right. That's the point of the story. And you can actually see that from the way the crowd reacts. If you look at the next verse, verse 14, it says when the people saw the sign which Jesus had done, and in John's gospel signs are always miracles, when he saw the sign which he had done, they didn't say he has taught us how to share, it said, "this is the prophet who is to come into the world."

Now in Judaism the prophet isn't just any prophet, it's the prophet like Moses. This is an allusion to Deuteronomy 18. So if you go back to Deuteronomy 18:18 in the Old Testament real quick, there's a very important prophecy of the new Moses, a prophet like Moses. It says this:

[The LORD said to Moses:] "I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brethren; and I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him."

So when people say this is the prophet who is to come into the world, they're saying this is the prophet like Moses. Why do they say that? Well because in the Old Testament what does Moses do? He gives a crowd of Israelites in the desert miraculous bread from heaven. He feeds the multitudes with miraculous bread. So when Jesus comes and performs a miracle, they say this is the guy, this is the new Moses, right, not he has taught us how to share with one another. If you want more details on that I go into it in my book *Jesus the Jewish roots of the Eucharist* and I show there how the Jews were actually waiting for the Messiah to be a new Moses.

In any case here you might be wondering at this point well wait, where did this interpretation come from, the idea of it's really about a miracle of sharing? Well that's an interesting story and most people don't know this but I want to be sure everyone is informed about it because of the popularity that interpretation has taken. That view was devised in the 19th century by a German Protestant scholar named Heinrich Everhart Gottlieb Paulus, right, that was his name. H. E. G. Paulus, he was German obviously. Heinrich Everard Gottlieb is a German name and he was a rationalist, he was a Protestant rationalist. And rationalism is a philosophy that says that all we can know is what reason alone can tell, in other words not faith, and also more importantly rationalism denies that miracles and prophecy are possible, okay. It denies all miraculous events like the virginal conception, or the bodily resurrection, or the feeding of the 5000, the miraculous multiplication of the loaves. So let me just summarize Paulus' interpretation here for just a minute. In another German scholar's book Albert Schweitzer, he summarized Paulus' interpretation and this is what Paulus claimed happened:

“When Jesus saw the multitude... He said to his disciples, ‘We will set the rich people among them a good example, that they may share their supplies with the others,’ and He began to distribute His own provisions, and those of the disciples, to the people who were sitting near them. The example had its effect, and soon there was plenty for everyone.²

² Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (New York: Macmillan, 1968 [orig. 1906]), 52, summarizing Heinrich Eberhard Gottlieb Paulus, *Das Leben Jesu als Grundlage einer reinen Geschichte des Urchristentums* (2 vols.; Heidelberg: C. F. Winter, 1828). For a refutation of this view, see Brant Pitre, *Jesus and the Last Supper* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 75-76.

Now why did Paulus argue for that? Notice, we just read John, did you hear anything about rich people? Did you hear anything about them holding back and then being moved to share? No, that's all being made up out of whole cloth, that's being read into the text. The reason Paulus came up with that interpretation was because as a rationalist he couldn't believe in an actual miraculous multiplication of the loaves so he had to come up with a purely naturalistic explanation, one that didn't involve any miracle, that just involved human agency and human actions. So he made up the idea that these rich Jewish people began to share their food and then everyone was moved by the example of Jesus. As I've said before, there are two big problems with that. First, it's nowhere in the text, second, it's motivated by a false philosophy. As Catholics we do not believe in rationalism. We do not believe that miracles are impossible or that prophecy is impossible. I mean the very articles of the Creed are anchored in the belief of the miraculous conception of Jesus, right, the virginal conception and also his miraculous resurrection from the dead, to say nothing of his miracles throughout his public ministry.

So I just want to point out to you that false philosophy behind the interpretation of the fact that it's exegetically groundless, and then one other thing, I think this is important to know. Heinrich Paulus, who's writing in the 19th century in Germany, he was also anti-Semitic. So there's an implicit anti-Semitism in this interpretation too, in which many people who took this view depicted the rich Jewish people as being selfish and they need to be moved by the humble poverty of Jesus and his disciples. So this interpretation is problematic on all kinds of levels. It's based on false philosophy, has no grounding in the text, and it's also implicitly anti-Semitic. In other words, it depicts the Jewish people, the Jewish crowds, as being both selfish and wealthy, neither of which is anywhere stated in the text whatsoever. My hope is that this interpretation of this passage dies a quick death; it needs to go away fast because it really is an irresponsible interpretation of the text in every way, shape and form. It's also important to point out that with regard to the Catholic Church in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* itself, paragraph 1335, the Church makes clear that the multiplication of the loaves being described is in fact a miracle. So *Catechism of the Catholic Church* paragraph 1335 says this:

The *miracles* of the multiplication of the loaves, when the Lord says the blessing, breaks and distributes the loaves through his disciples to feed the multitude, *prefigure the* superabundance of this unique bread of his Eucharist.³

So notice the Catechism is very clear there that it is a miracle of multiplication, not a “miracle of sharing.” That’s a false interpretation.

Alright, now with that out of the way, with the air cleared there, let’s go back to the Old Testament reading for today because that reference to the Eucharist we just saw the Catechism make is also guiding the selection of readings for the Old Testament for today. In this case the Old Testament is from 2 Kings 4:42-44 and it’s the story of Eli’sha, the prophet, multiplying loaves of bread. This is very important; Jesus wasn’t the first person in the Bible to perform a miraculous multiplication of loaves. Eli’sha also does this in the Old Testament in this verse, it says this:

A man came from Ba'al-shal'ishah, bringing the man of God 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 he 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.

Alright, what's going on here? Well in this case we just have an account of Eli’sha's prophetic powers, his power to perform miracles. Now you might be thinking here, wait Dr. Pitre I thought it was Eli’sha (eh-lee-shu) and others of you may be thinking, wait I thought it was Eli-sha (ely-sha), and the answer is yes it’s all those things. So we have a little bit of trouble in English because the name of this particular prophet, Eli’sha, sounds a lot like Elijah who was his predecessor. Well let me just make it clear here, Eli’sha, S-H-A, is the successor to the prophet Elijah. And one of the things about Eli’sha, the successor, is that he asked for a double portion of the prophetic spirit of the great Elijah. And so what’s interesting about both Elijah and Eli’sha is that they were two of the very few prophets in the Old

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Testament who actually performed miracles, right. Although sometimes people act as if the Old Testament is full of miracles, it really isn't, there are very few figures in the Old Testament who are known as miracle workers. Moses is a miracle worker, Elijah is a miracle worker, and Eli'sha is a miracle worker. They are the three principal miracle workers in the Old Testament. And Eli'sha is a very powerful miracle worker because he gets a double portion of Elijah's spirit and he's able to do wondrous things. In this case, one of them being multiplying 20 barley loaves and be able to feed 100 men so that they're all filled and that they have some left over.

Now why is that significant for our understanding of Jesus? Well it's significant because if you go back to the gospels you'll notice that John the Baptist, who was Jesus' predecessor, is depicted as a new Elijah, and there's a real sense in which in the gospels Jesus is being depicted as a new Eli'sha because he's John's successor. In a sense, John's the forerunner, Jesus comes after, but he's more powerful than John, right, he performs more wonders than John. He is, of course, the Messiah and John is just the forerunner. So in this case Jesus is revealing himself not just as a new Moses but also the new Eli'sha and that he's able to multiply loaves of bread, and not just for 100 men like Eli'sha did, but for 5000 men. So you see that, you see the fact that Jesus is transcending and surpassing one of the greatest prophets of the Old Testament. And by the way, Eli'sha was a great prophet of the Old Testament. Many of us might not think of him that way, but later on in the book of Kings and 2 Kings 13, after he's dead and buried, they're going to throw somebody into his grave and just touching the bones of Eli'sha makes this man rise from the dead. Now that is holiness and that is prophetic power, and even as powerful as Eli'sha was, he's nothing compared to Jesus. Jesus is gonna transcend him super abundantly in the miracle of the feeding of the 5000, and so that's kind of the subtext going on here to this passage in the Old Testament.

Alright so finally then the Responsorial Psalm for today is focused on the theme of feeding. So it's Psalm 145 and the refrain for the week is:

The hand of the Lord feeds us

So just as he feeds his people in the Old Testament through the hands of Eli'sha and then he feeds his people in the New Testament through the hands of Christ and his

apostles, so too we praise the Lord for feeding us. In particular verse 15 and 16 are worth highlighting:

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.

Now in the literal sense of this text what is this referring to? Obviously it's referring to the fact that every time you eat a morsel of food, every time you drink a glass of water, you are reaping the rewards of God's bountiful love, that he provides for us all the natural food there is in the world. However the church also wants us to look beyond that because at the end of the day the greatest gift he gives us, literally the greatest gift after the incarnation and the passion and death and resurrection of Christ, is the gift of the Eucharist in which he gives us himself under the appearance of bread and wine. This is the food of all foods. This is the greatest banquet of all banquets, and that's what he's giving to us in the miracle of the Eucharist.

So I think in this case, as we look ahead to the Eucharist, the feeding of the 5000 reveals something significant to us, that wherever the Eucharist is celebrated, on whatever altar of the world it's celebrated, it's coming from the one loaf so to speak of Jesus' table; it's coming from the one sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. The same Eucharist that Christ gives to the apostles at the Last Supper is what he gives to us in every single mass. This is another reason it's important not to do away with the miracle of multiplication in the feeding of the 5000 because in the same way that the whole crowd is fed from these five loaves, so to as the church we are all fed from the one loaf of Jesus Christ, who gives us his one body and his one blood, right. One Lord, one faith, one baptism, one Eucharist given too many. So if you think about it, just as Jesus transcended Eli'sha's miracle of multiplying food for 100 people and fed 5000 during his public ministry, so too in the mass now he multiplies the loaves even more abundantly and feeds millions, even billions of people, every day throughout the world. So the sacrament itself transcends even this amazing glorious miracle that Jesus performed in the feeding of the 5000 in John 6.