

SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Our Scripture passage comes from the Gospel of John 6:1–15. This text relates the story of the multiplication of the loaves and fishes and initiates the Eucharistic teaching of Jesus known as the “Bread of Life Discourse”. The miracle of the loaves and the fishes was deeply rooted and revered in the memory of first century Christians and is the only miracle of Jesus that appears in all four Gospels (Jn 6:1–15, Mt 14:13–21, Mk 6:32–34, and Lk 9:10–17). As the inaugural event for the Bread of Life discourse, this passage contains several important lessons for us as disciples and introduces themes to help us better appreciate our experience of seeking the Lord every time we share in the Eucharist.

The first lesson for discipleship is expressed by Jesus’ desire to lead us to deeper faith. The passage begins by telling us that a multitude followed Jesus because they saw the signs He performed. This indicates that they were following Jesus more as spectators than as believers. They may have seen the signs, but they did not understand what those signs meant. The word that is used to describe the crowd’s sight (Greek: *Eoron*) refers to an experience of superficial observance. Jesus, on the other hand, “sees” (Greek: *Theasamenos*) the multitude and is able to look deeply into their hearts and understand their need for growth in faith. The verb used to describe Jesus’ sight really means to have insight and not just superficial observance. In vs. 3 we are told that Jesus sat down, and in doing so, assumed the position of a teacher in the ancient world. This chapter, then, is about the instruction Jesus wishes to offer the crowds so that they can move from being mere superficial spectators, who watch Jesus do things, to committed disciples, who understand the meaning and purpose behind Jesus’ actions. If the crowds do not develop this deepened insight, they will misunderstand Jesus’ identity and try to make the Lord fit their own expectations. We see this mistaken response to Jesus in vs. 14 and 15 where the crowds acclaim Jesus as a prophet and a king.

Those who do receive Jesus’ teaching, and develop deepened insight into our Lord’s actions and person, are able to correctly profess the faith of a disciple who follows the Lord, not because of what Jesus does but because of who Jesus is (see Peter’s confession of faith in Jn 6:68–69). Jesus wants us to move from being spectators to becoming committed disciples as well. In order for that growth in faith to happen, we must come to understand the deeper meaning in our Lord’s actions. If our faith is only a matter of rote prayers, religious rituals, and memorized creeds, this passage invites us to let Jesus become our teacher so He can lead us to understand the relationship offered to us in prayer, the reality of grace being presented to us in religious ritual, and the intimate self-communication of God shared with us in creeds. Those who accepted the revelation and insight of Jesus grew closer to Him; those who did not accept that deepened faith ended up walking away from the Lord (see Jn 6:66–68). The quality of our discipleship will depend upon the insight we gain from Jesus as our teacher so that we can look beyond the signs that fill our lives and see the reality of God’s presence in our midst.

How can a person today be a superficial spectator when it comes to his or her experience of faith and Church?

What ministries or opportunities can help members of our faith community understand the meaning and purpose behind their practices of faith, ritual actions of worship, or

forms of prayer?

How has the growth from superficial awareness to deepened insight occurred in your faith life?

When Jesus “sees” your faith community, in what way do you think the Lord most wants to lead you so that you can be more committed disciples?

How can people today, who misunderstand Jesus’ action in the world, remain superficial spectators of faith?

Into what errors can a superficial faith lead them?

The second lesson of discipleship occurs when we are told that Jesus posed a question to “test” Philip. Jesus asked Philip, “How are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?”. Jesus was really more interested in hearing what Philip had to say than the solution Philip offered. We are then told that the Lord already knew what He was going to do (note—many Scripture scholars believe that this phrase is the central point of this entire passage and sets the stage for Jesus to deliver His greatest gift to the disciples). Philip responded by stating the impossibility of addressing the need with human resources. In doing so, Philip was revealing his temptation to trust only in his own ability and self-sufficiency to resolve the problem. Jesus wants the disciples to acknowledge their inability so that they might be able to realize the Lord’s power to do what they cannot accomplish on their own. Along with Philip’s response of what cannot be done, Andrew offers an answer of what can be done: He presents a child who has five barley loaves and two fish. Jesus accepts this meager and insufficient offering of the disciples and transforms it into an abundant and new reality. The lesson of discipleship is this: God can do infinitely more with our lives than we can accomplish on our own.

Like Philip, we can be overwhelmed with the needs of the world around us. Sometimes we wonder if our efforts really make a difference. In those moments, it is important to remember that one of the greatest temptations is to do nothing because we can only do a little. Mother Teresa is quoted as saying, “Not all of us can do great things. But we can do small things with great love.” Nothing done with love is ever small because God is love, and what we do with love we do with God, and God is never small. In this Scripture passage, we are reminded that discipleship is about God and not us. God can do great things with what we offer Him; the problem is that we often don’t offer the Lord very much with which to work. Our challenge is to offer Christ the gifts of our lives with love and confidence so that God can do great things with those gifts. If Andrew had tried to feed the crowd himself with those gifts of five loaves and two fish then only a few people would have been fed. Because Andrew offered them to Jesus, the Lord was able to feed thousands. Sometimes Jesus tests us to see if we are trusting in ourselves or in Him. . How we address daily situations and whether or not we offer the Lord our meager gifts provide the answer to that test.

When are you tempted to “Do nothing because you can only do a little”, and how does this passage help you overcome that temptation?

Who for you is an example of faith, like Andrew, who offers to the Lord with love and generosity the insufficient gifts of their lives?

How does God test you to see if you put your faith in your own self-sufficiency or in God’s grace?

What are small things that you can do with great love in your everyday life?

The offertory time at Mass is meant to be a prayerful experience of spiritually offering our lives to the Lord. Our lives are to be used by Him, transforming us to become His presence in the world, even as the bread and wine are transformed to become His Body and Blood. How does the offering of Andrew affect the way you will prayerfully enter into the offertory at Mass?

The third lesson of discipleship occurs when we are told that this event took place at the Feast of Passover. This is a very important element of the passage and it is meant to connect with other events that occur in John's Gospel on the Feast of Passover: The gift of new wine at Cana (see Jn 2:13) and the celebration of the Last Supper (see Jn 13:1) are two such events. It is no accident that these three events are connected by the Feast of Passover (Wine, Bread, and the Last Supper). They are all Eucharistic moments. The Gospel of John presents the gift of the Eucharist as something that occurs during the daily life and ministry of Jesus and not simply something that took place once at the Last Supper. This presentation is meant to encourage disciples to understand the importance and significance of receiving the Eucharist as part of our regular daily lives as well. The Eucharistic significance of this passage is indicated in two ways. Notice how Jesus Takes, Gives Thanks (literally, "Eucharistizes"), Breaks, and Gives the five loaves and two fish to the crowds, and it becomes more than enough for them.

We need to remember that these four verbs are very significant and are only used in this combination in the context of Eucharistic scenes (see Mk 14:22–23, Lk 22:19, 24:30, 1 Cor 11:23–24). Anytime Jesus uses these four verbs the reader automatically knows that our Lord is celebrating the Eucharist. This insight should inform the way we read this passage. John wants us to learn something essential about the Eucharist so he included a very important additional detail: There is symbolism in the fact that there are five loaves and that the name of Jesus appears five times in this literary unit (see vs. 3, 5, 10, 11, 15). This numeric connection between the name of Jesus and the number of loaves points to an identification of Jesus with the bread. Thus, when Jesus gave the five loaves He was giving Himself to the crowds!

How does the Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist affect the way you prepare for Mass?

How has the Eucharist become an important part of your regular Christian life and discipleship?

What are symbols we use today that help us understand the Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist (like the frequency of the name of Jesus equating with the five loaves)?

How do you think Jesus wants to change our faith community at every Mass?

The fourth lesson of discipleship is communicated when we are finally told that the people were "satisfied" (see Jn 6:11). This is the only time in John's Gospel that we are ever informed of people's satisfaction. This phrase echoes the instruction to first century Christians known as the *Didache* which relates that disciples shared in the Eucharist until they "had their fill".¹ John is speaking about more than just the physical satisfaction of hunger; John is referring to that deep longing of our hearts that only God can satisfy. Jesus, and only Jesus, was able to satisfy that hunger in the multiplication of the loaves and fishes through the gift of the Eucharist. This

¹ *Didache*, Chap. X, 1.

singular ability of God to satisfy our deepest longings and yearnings was expressed beautifully by Saint Augustine when he said, “You have formed us for Yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in You.”² Our hearts are made for God and we become frustrated and dissatisfied when we try to fill them with other things.

This passage teaches us, as disciples, that Jesus wants to satisfy us just as He satisfied the crowds that day so long ago. The Lord wants to lead us to deep insights of faith so that we can know His presence with us and His action in our world. He invites us to share our life with Him when we make a spiritual offering of ourselves so that He can share His life with us in the Eucharist. When we seek to fill our deepest hungers with accomplishments, entertainment, human relationships, positions, possessions, or the pursuit of pleasure then we inevitably remain unsatisfied and empty. This Gospel passage is good news for disciples who have been hungering for more—that hunger is an invitation by God to deeper relationship with Himself.

From what false sources do people seek satisfaction for the deep longings of their hearts today and what is typically the result?

When have you experienced lasting spiritual satisfaction from your relationship with God in Jesus, and how did you foster that satisfying relationship?

What helps make the Mass a satisfying experience for you, and what is it that detracts from the Mass making it less than a satisfying experience?

How have you realized the truth of Saint Augustine’s quote?

The fifth lesson of discipleship is presented through the command of Jesus to the disciples when He said, “Gather up the fragments left over, that nothing may be lost.” In response to our Lord’s instruction the disciples gathered twelve baskets of fragments. There are two important messages for us in this act of gathering. First, the word used for “fragments” (Greek: *Klasmata*) is the same word used in other first century Christian writings to refer to the fragments (remnants) of the Eucharist. Today, we gather the “fragments”, or remaining pieces of the Eucharist, and place them in the tabernacle. Like the Early Church, we treasure the gift of the Eucharist as an enduring gift of Jesus. We reserve the Eucharist in the Tabernacle for purposes of personal prayer and for the distribution of Communion to the sick and homebound. In all of these actions, we are fulfilling the Lord’s command and showing our respect for Jesus in the Eucharist. In addition to the reservation of the remaining Eucharist in the tabernacle, we also show our reverence for any fragments by placing special cloths on the altar (called “corporals”) to preserve any possible pieces of the Host or drops of the Precious Blood that may accidentally fall.

Second, the twelve baskets would be immediately understood as a symbol for the restoration of the Twelve Tribes of Israel. The act of gathering that took place was not only to ensure reverence for the gift of the Eucharist but also to demonstrate that, through the Eucharist, the New People of God are being constituted and the Church is being formed. The word Jesus used when He commanded the disciples to “gather” (Greek: *Synagein*) is the same word used by the early Christians in the first and second century to describe the “gathering” of the community of the Church.³ It should be noted that this term is only used in John’s account of the multiplication of the loaves and fishes and indicates the author’s clear intention to connect the

² St Augustine, *Confessions*, Book I, Chap. 1

³ This description can be seen in the *Didache*; 1 Clement, and Ignatius.

act of gathering with the formation of the Church. The people in this story first started to gather to Jesus because they saw the signs the Lord was performing.

Jesus wants us to be gathered to Him for a deeper reason of faith. Our Lord will ultimately gather all people to Himself when He is exalted on the Cross (see Jn 12:32), and that spiritual gathering continues by our participation in the mystery of Jesus' Death and Resurrection that is celebrated in the Eucharist. In order to be drawn to Jesus, disciples must develop the insight of faith that allows them see in the bread and wine the very reality and presence of Jesus' Flesh and Blood (see Jn 6:53–57). When disciples share in the Eucharist with informed awareness and reverence, we are gathered to Jesus just as the fragments were gathered in baskets—and the Church is formed. The formative power of the Eucharist in constituting the Church as the Mystical Body of Christ was also taught by Saint Augustine who said, “Be what you can see and receive what you are”.⁴

*What signs of respect and reverence for the Eucharist have inspired your faith?
How do you show reverence for the Eucharistic presence of Jesus in the Tabernacle?
When has the presence of Jesus in the Tabernacle been a focus of your prayer?
Have you ever been distracted by someone's lack of reverence for the Eucharist or for the presence of Jesus in the tabernacle and how was that lack of reverence demonstrated?
How does Saint Augustine's quote about the relationship between the Eucharist and the Church inspire you?
How can a faith community help people understand the necessary and formative relationship between the Eucharist and the Church?
What prevents the Church from fully experiencing the gathering Jesus desires through the gift of the Eucharist?*

⁴ St Augustine, *Sermon*, 272.