

20th Sunday of Ordinary Time B “Bread of Life and Simple Faith”

Fr. Frank Schuster

Earlier in June, I attended a yearly conference with all my brother priests from the Seattle Archdiocese called “Priest Days”. The speaker for this conference was Bishop Barber from Oakland. He told us of a pilgrimage site in New Mexico that was growing in popularity, called Sanctuario de Chimayo just north of Sante Fe. And so, having time off in July, I decided to drive there to learn more about it perhaps take in a few churches and national parks along the way. It was wonderful.

And so, what is the story about this pilgrimage site in Chimayo? The story is, about two hundred years ago on a Good Friday, a rancher by the name of Don Bernardo was on his knees praying on a hill on his property during the night. While he was praying, he noticed a brilliant glow coming from the ground from the other side of his property a considerable distance away. He was awestruck by this and decided to check it out. When he got to the spot, the glow was gone but his feet tripped on a hole there and noticed that there was something buried in the hole. Reaching down, he finds himself lifting a beautiful wood carved crucifix. He rejoiced in his discovery by bringing the cross back to his house on the other end of the property. After praying before it, he went to bed, and the next morning the crucifix was gone. It was quite puzzling. Where did it go? Well, the next time he was on the other side of his property, he checked out the hole where he found the crucifix, and lo and behold, the crucifix was there in the hole.

Don Bernardo, puzzled by this, called the priest from nearest parish a town away. The priest came, saw the crucifix, and remarked how beautiful it was and told Bernardo that the crucifix belonged in a church. Bernardo agreed to this. The priest took the crucifix to the nearest parish the next town over and enjoyed attending to it, but not for long. The next day, the crucifix was gone. Where did they find it? The Crucifix was back in the hole on Don Bernardo’s property. Bernardo invited the priest over again and suggested that maybe Jesus wanted a church built there over the hole. The priest suggested that would be a good thing for Bernardo to do! And this is what Bernardo did and this church has been there now for about two hundred years with the crucifix proudly displayed above the altar.

On the side of the church is a room with the hole where the crucifix was found. Pilgrims go there because healings have been associated with the dirt taken from there. In fact, there is a room where pilgrims have left their crutches behind in thanksgiving. Bishop Barber’s point in telling us about this pilgrimage site is that Chimayo is a shrine that celebrates the triumph of simple faith. And I have found this to be true in my priesthood. We tend to get more mileage out of giving someone a holy card than a theology book. Both faith and reason are celebrated in

the Catholic Church, but there are times we overthink things. At the end of the day, it is the mystery of our faith that moves our hearts.

Jesus says, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world." And the people listening to Jesus are left scratching their heads wondering what this rabbi, who claimed to be God's son, was trying to tell them.

We are in the fourth Sunday of the Bread of Life discourse from the Gospel of St. John chapter 6. The chapter, remember, begins with the multiplication of the loaves and fish. The people were so amazed that they wanted to make him king. He feeds us, let's put him in charge. As a result, Jesus leaves them. He wants to be our savior, not a political ruler. The next Sunday, the story continues with the people finding Jesus back in Capernaum. Jesus teaches them to stop working for food that perishes but rather work for food that endures for eternal life. We are invited to stop being so preoccupied with earthly concerns but rather start seeing our lives from God's perspective, the big picture so to speak. Last week, the drama heats up when the multiplication of the loaves is compared to the bread from heaven that the Jews ate with Moses in the desert. More than that, Jesus said "I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world." This week, Jesus is making the startling claim that he is greater than Moses. He says, "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him. Just as the living Father sent me and I have life because of the Father, so also the one who feeds on me will have life because of me."

Now we understand clearly what Jesus was thinking when he multiplied the bread. This sign points clearly to the institution of the Holy Eucharist. If we are to receive Christ in this way, we are to be Christ simply put. In this way, the Promised Land is no longer a piece of real estate that God was leading Moses' people to. The Promised Land now is eternal life in Christ.

The crowd gathered was grumpy about this because Jesus was making himself out to be God. It reminds me of something Bishop Barron used to tell us while we were at seminary. He would tell us that passages like we have today force us to choose either one of two conclusions. Either Jesus is lying and therefore a really bad person to be opposed or Jesus is the Son of God and everything he says is true and should be listened to. These two conclusions present themselves when we come forward to communion. Either Jesus is fully present in the Eucharist, body, blood, soul and divinity or it is all a lie or, at best, a nice metaphor.

Personally, I think sometimes we put too much thought into these things. Sometimes it is simple faith that builds a church in the middle of a desert. Sometimes it is simple faith that moves a half million people each year (myself included) to make a pilgrimage there. Sometimes the Eucharist is best understood

with simple faith in a Lord who wants to be as close to us as food and drink, really and truly, as we make our journey towards everlasting life. And if we looked at our lives and our relationships more with simple faith how much better would our lives be?

I will speak more about this next week as we wrap up the Bread of Life discourse, stay tuned!