

20th Sunday of Ordinary Time “Bread of Life Touched by God”
Fr. Frank Schuster

My friends, in the middle of summer every three years during the year of Saint Mark, the Church takes a break from Mark and focuses for five weeks on the Bread of Life discourse as found in the sixth chapter of the Gospel of Saint John. It can be a rough time for homilists because if we say everything we want to say about the Eucharist in the first week we can find ourselves wondering what to say for the remaining weeks. I have found the best solution to that conundrum is to....go on vacation. Thank you for putting up with my absence. I had a great time away spending most of it with family which was very special for me. I kept my homily website updated while I was away, so if you are interested in what my thoughts were for the first three weekends of the Bread of Life discourse, you are welcome to check these out there if you would like. There is my shameless plug for the day.

This year I have been exploring the question, what do we hunger for most? That seems to be the essential question posed by John chapter 6. As a brief recap of where we have been, the Bread of Life discourse begins with Jesus leading a large group of people into a deserted place where they eventually became hungry. Jesus performed the miraculous sign of the multiplication of the loaves and the fish, everyone had their fill and they were so impressed with Jesus that they were ready to carry him off to make him King. “He fills our bellies, let’s make him king!” Jesus retreats away from them to be alone because the people had totally missed the point. He was not interested in becoming our political savior. He is interested in saving us from the power of sin and death. The second Sunday begins with Jesus returning home to Capernaum, the people of course followed him and so Jesus asks them, why do you work for food that perishes? Why do that? Why spend so much effort on obtaining things that turn to dust? It is the same question as: what do you hunger for most? And this wasn’t an admonishment of having a good job or providing good things for our family, it just that so much that we hunger for materially in this world in fact eventually turns to dust. Jesus asks us what do you hunger for most and the correct answer is God. We hunger for union with God more than anything else that this world has to offer when we get right down to it. I do, don’t you?

This past weekend, the story continued with the revelation that Jesus is the bread of life. This revelation was in stark contrast to the first reading in Kings with Elijah’s face plant in the desert praying for death and the reference in the Gospel to Exodus 16 when the Hebrews in the desert were ready to quit and go back to Pharaoh. Even though we hunger for God most in our hearts, how often do we hunger for all the wrong things, even things that eventually lead to our destruction? We can all come up with examples in our minds of how we do this, but for me, case in point is what we sadly learned this past week from the grand jury report in Pennsylvania. I read excerpts from it and to be honest I wanted to vomit. These priests and bishops were ordained to feed the flock not abuse them. And they did abuse them in the most egregiously evil ways imaginable. When Jesus asks us the question, what do you hunger for most? Their answer clearly wasn’t Jesus. And, this makes me angry right now, as a priest and as a human being. I’ll be honest with you. I want their chasubles ripped off their bodies in exchange for millstones around their necks and good riddance! It is so evil what they did. As human beings, how often do we hunger for the wrong things, and sometimes these hungers have a way of leading people to destructive behavior and self-destruction. How better would we be if we followed Jesus instead?

God's answer to Elijah when he hungered for death was bread from heaven. God's answer to the Hebrews in the desert when they wanted to go back to being slaves to Pharaoh was bread from heaven. And, Jesus' answer to us as we make our pilgrimage through this life, with all of its joys and frustrations, is to give us bread from heaven. And so the question is still posed to us, what do you hunger for most in this life? I was privileged to celebrate Mass with family these past three weekends, one at my mom's parish on her birthday, the next was on a patio table next to a lake in Oregon with my sister's and brother's families. This past weekend, it was in the back yard of my cousin's house in Spokane for a family reunion. It is such a treat as a priest to celebrate mass with family in this way. I asked the same question, what do you hunger for most and my five year old nephew Jack raised his hand and said, "I think ice cream". It was a very warm day and his answer was really, really good, although I could tell from the looks from my relatives, that their answer might have been closer to BBQ ribs and a nice cold beer. And so, as the Bread of Life discourse continues into this weekend, what Jesus offers us instead is rather startling. This weekend we learn that not only is Jesus the bread of life but that what he is really offering us is his flesh and blood.

We have the finest treatment on the theology of Eucharist in the entire bible in this weekend's reading. The Greek used for "flesh" in this Gospel reading is "sarx". It is the most literal word in the Greek dictionary for flesh. Jesus Christ is our bread from heaven and he is truly present in the Eucharist, body, blood, soul and divinity. What I like most about this revelation is that the Eucharist is an objective reality, a moment in time when we can come forward and be physically touched by God, welcoming God's body into our body. If we hunger for God most in this life, the Eucharist is our best opportunity to allow God to touch us physically, to become one with us along our pilgrim journey.

What is also unique about our faith is that the objectivity of the Eucharist does not rely on the worthiness of the priest or bishop consecrating the host and chalice. Now don't get me wrong. As a people of God, we must demand for worthier priests, we must demand for worthier bishops, and God in heaven, give us worthier Cardinals! It is just that, it is also a comfort for me that we can go from this Catholic church to that Catholic church, never remember the priest's name, but nevertheless receive Jesus objectively and truly in the Blessed Sacrament. This is humbling for me as a priest to consider; but it is also a consolation. It is a consolation that, throughout the world, people can come to Mass for Jesus rather than for the priest.

What do we hunger for most in this life, especially when life becomes challenging or frustrating and our spiritual gas tanks are nearing empty? What do we hunger for most in this life? The answer for us must always be: we hunger for Jesus, who is the way, the truth and the life.