

21st Sunday of Ordinary Time

“The Bread of Life and the Battlefield of the Human Heart”

Fr. Frank Schuster

Three years ago, I shared with you a pilgrimage I took to Chimayo in New Mexico. Priests can get into an annoying habit of repeating stories. I have been guilty of this a number of times. However, the experience I had on this pilgrimage seems to speak so clearly to what is going on in our Gospel reading and in the Church today I felt the Holy Spirit calling me to share it with you again. A brief reminder about this pilgrimage site in New Mexico: 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. 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 found 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. And the next morning the crucifix was gone. Where did it go? Well, the next time he was walking about, he checked out the hole where he found the crucifix, and lo and behold, the crucifix had returned there. This happened several times before it was clear God was asking him to build a church on that site, which he 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 there is a room with the hole where the crucifix was found. Pilgrims go there because healings have been associated with the dirt taken from the ground there. In fact, there is a room where pilgrims have left their crutches behind in thanksgiving after being healed of their infirmity. Thousands make a pilgrimage to this spot every year. It is holy ground and a triumph for simple faith.

That is the story in a nutshell; however, there is more to the story of my trip that really struck me as profound. You see, as I was getting closer to Chimayo, I checked my hotel app on my smartphone to see where I should stay. Los Alamos was close to Chimayo so that is where I booked two nights. And I think the Holy Spirit was responsible for that because the juxtaposition between Chimayo and Los Alamos was striking.

You see, people go to Chimayo because from the ground comes healing. In Los Alamos, where nuclear bombs were made, it is a place where from the ground was harnessed death and destruction. That was the assessment of Oppenheimer after he saw the fruits of his work, “I have become death, the destroyer of worlds.” And obviously the history of Los Alamos is quite complicated, lots to be debated about it. However, for someone like me on a pilgrimage, I was just struck by the contrast between the two towns, “from the

earth comes life” and “from the earth comes death”. In my prayer, I wondered if the story of the human race could be told by these two towns, Chimayo and Los Alamos. That perhaps the story of the human race is also the story of the human heart.

You see, my friends, in every human heart there is holy ground that brings life. However, there is also a place in every human heart that is radioactive, destructive. Jesus says in our Gospel reading “The words I have spoken to you are Spirit and life. But there are some of you who do not believe.” The Gospel today also says, “As a result of this, many of his disciples returned to their former way of life and no longer accompanied him.”

Here we are at the conclusion of the Bread of Life discourse in John chapter 6 that we have been following for five weekends. A recap of where we have been: The chapter, remember, began 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 and world around us from God’s perspective, the big picture so to speak. The third Sunday, the drama heated up when the multiplication of the loaves was 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.” Last week, Jesus continued to elaborate his startling claim that he was greater than Moses by saying, “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.”

This gave the listeners present a clear understanding of what Jesus was doing when he multiplied the bread. This sign pointed clearly to the institution of the Holy Eucharist. The Promised Land is no longer a piece of real estate that God was leading Moses’ people to. The Promised Land is now eternal life in Christ. The crowd gathered was scandalized and angry about this because Jesus was making himself out to be God. And so, as we near the conclusion of the Bread of Life discourse we learn, “As a result of this, many of his disciples returned to their former way of life and no longer accompanied him.”

My friends, in every human heart, there is holy ground that gives life and brings us closer the Jesus and the Church. However, there is also a place in every human heart that is radioactive and destructive that leads us away from Jesus. As we all have seen, priests, bishops and even cardinals are not immune from this. And when they fail, they must be held accountable, I share more on that in my

letter in the bulletin this weekend for your consideration. However, like I shared with you last weekend, it gives me profound comfort and consolation that Jesus offers himself objectively and truly to us, body, blood, soul and divinity, in the Holy Eucharist regardless of the worthiness of the minister we receive from. And when we receive Christ, we are to become Christ. The more we receive Christ into our hearts worthily, as believers, the less influenced we should become by what's toxic in our world. We, in fact, become an antidote to the poison in this world and a force for much needed change by the example of our lives. This is because when we receive Christ, we are to be Christ. And this is a struggle for all of us at times, because there is a war being waged in our hearts. This is why "Jesus then said to the Twelve (and by extension, to all of us), "Do you also want to leave?" Have you ever heard Jesus asking you that question, maybe on a dark day, "Do you also want to leave"? Simon Peter answered him (and answers for all of us), "Master, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life."