

JULY 29TH, 2018: SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

II Kings 4:42-44 Ephesians 4:1-6 John 6:1-15

Regular readers of this commentary know what to expect today. Every three years I begin the same way. This is the Sunday which reminds me of a unique experience.

Back in the 50s, our high school seminary had regular three-reel Sunday night movies. Because we had just one projector, we had two, ten-minute breaks, giving the projectionist time to change the reels and the rest of us time to use the rest room. One memorable Sunday we came back for the second reel, only to discover the movie people had picked the wrong reel. It was from a completely different movie! We dutifully sat through it, took our break, and returned to view the third reel of the original film. Exactly what we do on the Seventeenth Sunday of the Year, B Cycle.

We've been going through Mark's gospel, until we reach his first account of the "bread miracle." Then, for the next five Sundays, Mark's movie is interrupted by John's movie. Finally on the Twenty-Second Sunday we return to Mark.

All of us in the seminary gym that night immediately realized the difference between the second and third reels. Sadly, only a rare person recognizes the difference between Mark's bread miracle and John's. To most people they sound alike. We haven't been trained to recognize each evangelist's unique theology.

Briefly, Mark stresses the role of the community in the feeding; John zeros in on Jesus' role. Mark emphasizes the peoples' action; John focuses on the bread and wine itself.

Only our Ephesians passage brings up the community's importance, but the faithful's humility, gentleness and patience aren't directly connected to any bread miracle.

Except for the man from Baal-shalishah who supplies the twenty barley loaves, only Elisha plays a role in our II Kings feeding. Except for eating the miraculous bread, no other person participates in the process.

In our gospel pericope, Jesus' disciples help only by informing him about the boy who has the five barley loaves and two fish, and then prepare the "large crowd" for the imminent banquet. The food they share isn't even their own.

But it's significant for John that this "sign" takes place in the context of Passover. Notice that John, unlike the other three evangelists, doesn't have Jesus institute the Eucharist at the Last Supper. (He institutes another "sacrament" then: the foot-washing.) His Jesus gives us the Eucharist here, at the miraculous feeding. Perhaps that's one of the reasons John's Jesus is in total control of the situation. He, for instance, knows what he's going to do even before he finds out about the boy's bread and fish.

Though it might have historically taken Jesus' first disciples a while to understand the implications of what he said and did during the meal they shared on the night before he died, John makes it clear the "Prophet" had everything precisely worked out in advance, exactly what we would presume of someone who's also God.

It's this divine person who enters the deepest parts of our lives during the Lord's Supper. We'll see and hear the implications of that unity during the next weeks. It's a unique experience.

But now it's enough to understand that Jesus is the one who's started this process. He loves us enough to share his actual body and blood with us; shares it enough that no matter how much we receive from him, there's always "leftovers." His giving never runs out.

Our role is simply to understand this gift in the right way. John's not only going to make certain we will, he'll give us the reason this gift is essential to the faith the risen Jesus wishes to share with us. We not only share his faith, we actually share him.

AUGUST 5TH, 2018: EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Exodus 16:2-4, 12-15 Ephesians 4:17, 20-24 John 6:24-25

Whenever we come across grumbling and griping during the Exodus, we know that particular passage comes from the “Yahwistic source.” That particular author had to deal with a fair amount of grumbling and griping in her own community. Somehow they felt left out of Yahweh’s salvation history. Though God had worked “signs and wonders” during the Israelites’ first centuries, now, shortly after King David’s death in the 10th century BCE, people were beginning to believe those glory days were in the past, gone forever. They couldn’t perceive any traces of Yahweh’s care and concern in their everyday lives. They simply were born too late. Nothing left to do but complain about their fate.

At this point the Yahwistic author steps in and reminds them of something they’ve overlooked: the Exodus Israelites also grumbled and griped. Though Yahweh’s signs and wonders are all around them, they aren’t “explicit” enough to remove all doubts. When the slightest problem arises – like hunger – they jump to the conclusion God’s left them, and the complaining starts.

It’s important that Scripture scholars are convinced today’s double miracle – manna and quail – can be explained by natural phenomena. The manna, by the nightly secretion of insects on trees and bushes; the quail, by native bird migrations. Anyone adept in survival techniques would have been familiar with both. What was natural for native Bedouins was miraculous for a bunch of runaway slaves. One could easily miss God’s hand in the natural around us.

Along the same line, the Pauline disciple responsible for Ephesians hammers away at the “metanoia” necessary for all Jesus’ followers. Believers and non-believers live in the same world. We basically experience the same things. The difference revolves around how we interpret those experiences. Having a different value system, we’re able to see, hear and touch things others miss. We sense things through the faith of Jesus. The risen Jesus doesn’t normally step in and change reality for our benefit, working miracles on a daily basis. He/she simply helps us see, hear and touch the miraculous that’s already there.

In a way, that’s what John’s Jesus helps us do when we encounter the Eucharist. Though Paul – in I Corinthians 11 – expects the faithful to acknowledge the fundamental difference between a group of people eating lunch at McDonald’s and a faith community sharing a Eucharistic meal, John focuses on the fundamental difference between regular table bread and wine and Eucharistic bread and wine. According to John’s Jesus, the former takes care of our bodily hunger and thirst, the latter, our spirit’s hunger and thirst. Obviously the latter is essential to living a truly fulfilled life.

When compared to the Exodus manna, no matter how miraculous, those nightly insect secretions can’t measure up. Those bread-like flakes only satisfied the Israelites for a day. The Eucharistic bread, on the other hand, will stop us from ever hungering again. This bread morphs into the “bread of life” for which we constantly hunger, even when our stomachs are full.

I presume without these John 6 passages we’d have no tabernacles in our churches. Following Paul, we’d genuflect in front of the community, not the Eucharistic bread. Yet it’s good to see how our understanding of the Eucharist has changed its emphasis through the years.

There’s certainly nothing wrong with evolution, as long as we don’t forget Scripture’s earlier emphasis, as we obviously did for centuries. The problem is, it costs us very little to acknowledge the presence of Jesus in the bread and wine. On the other hand, experiencing Jesus in the community causes us to have a constant death, especially if some of those people belong to a different race, social status or even just a different political party.

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