

2 Kings: 4: 42-44;  
 Psalm 145: 10-19;  
 Ephesians 3: 14-21;  
 John 6: 1-21

### Introduction

This is the first of five Sundays in which the Gospel reading is from the “Bread of Life Discourse” in John’s Gospel. In this section, one thing John focuses our attention upon is Jesus’ identity. There are several identity statements throughout John about the nature of Jesus, but none is more well-known than “I am the Bread of Life.”

“I am the Bread of Life.”

It is a moving description of the nature of Jesus. We will hear this phrase in next week’s Gospel lesson; however, we need to hear it now to enter fully into the profundity of today’s Gospel.

### Symbolism

Huston Smith, renowned author about world religions, reminds us in his 2005 work entitled *The Soul of Christianity; Restoring the Great Tradition*, that religion’s technical language is symbolism. Smith defines symbolism as the science of the relations between the multiple levels of reality. We must give the language of religion our full attention if we are to gain meaning and depth from reading Holy Scripture.

Access to a higher plane than that of mere fundamentalism is what Smith is teaching. It is vital that we Christians recognize that the early church fathers appreciated Holy Scripture in allegorical and symbolic ways, not literally. In fact, as Smith and many scholars point out, the retreat of some Christian groups toward literalism is a rather recent phenomenon in the history of the church.

The symbolism embedded in Christianity is rich and powerful. It leads us to Truth with a capital “T.” In addition, religion’s technical language is sacred art in its inclusive sense. You and I know this intuitively when we gaze at paintings and iconography, when we let sacred music absorb our soul, when we repeat poetry and stories, parables, and figures of speech, when we walk a

labyrinth or go on a pilgrimage to a sacred site. You could think of many other examples, I am sure.

When we participate in sacred drama as we do today worshiping God with our souls, our bodies and our minds, we are engaging at a higher plane than when we wash dishes or pour over a spread sheet—not that they are not important! That need to go higher, and paradoxically, deeper, is why we are here together sharing the sacred liturgy. The sacramental arc of life we adopt when we become Christians is replete with the sacred and the symbolic.

Smith references Plato, who called stories that deflect our attention “upward,” as “likely tales,” to indicate that it is the nonliteral connotations of their words that are important. What words and stories symbolize is what transforms us.

### Knowing

As we delve into the Gospel of John it is important to recognize that there are two distinct and complementary ways of knowing: rational and intuitive. It is often said of the writer, John, that he was the most mystical of the four Gospel writers. I would agree. His writing takes us to a different place, although he includes much material from the three synoptic gospels. There is also much unique material in John.

John’s language deflects our attention “upward” over and over. Just read the first 18 verses of the first chapter of John—better known as the Prologue-- and my meaning will be clear. As you do so, keep in mind what Einstein told us: “The intuitive mind is a sacred gift and the rational mind is its faithful servant.” Smith uses this famous quote of Einstein in his work, and he includes another favorite quotation from Blaise Pascal: “The heart has its reasons the mind knows not of.”

### Loaves and Fishes

All four gospels include the story we heard today about the multiplication of the loaves and fishes. When that happens, it tells us that this is a vital story of Christianity. Jesus responds to the hunger of the large crowd following him. He

does not ignore them. He sees to it that they are fed, not accepting the technical obstacles presented to him by his disciples. Despite all odds, the crowd is fed and there is an abundance, an abundance that filled twelve baskets.

I love that this story provides such strong continuity with Judaism. It keeps us ever mindful that that as Christians we are inexorably tied to the ancient religion of our Jewish spiritual ancestors. Those twelve baskets, for example, symbolize the twelve tribes of Israel. Continuity and discontinuity are the themes which are at work between Judaism and Christianity then and now. In this story we see much continuity, not only with the twelve baskets but also with the timing of the story. This event is situated during the time of the Passover, which commemorates the signature event in Israel's history, i.e., when God provided for the Hebrew people by saving their first born male children from the Angel of Death. The Angel "passed over" the Hebrew children, saving them.

In the story of the loaves and fishes, it is Jesus who provides. Is this Jesus indeed "the prophet who is to come into the world?" That is the question posed in the Gospel. What is the identity of Jesus? Is he the Jewish Messiah, the promised one?

2nd Kings: loaves of barley & fresh ears of grain

Look at the brief Hebrew lesson appointed for today. It is from the Second Book of Kings. It is so brief, I shall read it again: A man came from Baal-shalishah, bringing food from the first fruits to the man of God: twenty loaves of barley and fresh ears of grain in his sack. Elisha said, "Give it to the people and let them eat." But his servant said, "How can I set this before a hundred people?" So he repeated, "Give it to the people and let them eat, for thus says the Lord, "They shall eat and have some left." He set it before them, they ate, and had some left, according to the word of the Lord.

Hearing this selection from a book in the Hebrew bible should evoke a strong sense of continuity as we hear the more well-known

story of Jesus feeding the 5000 thousand. The numbers are different, the intent is the same. An aide to the man of God can only see the obstacles—think disciples in the context of the loaves and fishes story—but the Lord, through his agent, provides nonetheless.

And, note...there is food left over! Is there any doubt that abundance is a deep theme of both the passage from 2nd Kings and from the Gospel of John? Abundance!

In the 2nd Kings selection, there is an important detail which is not part of John's. The man brought what is called "first fruits." First fruits refers to the first of the harvest. The spiritual expectation of faithful Jews was and is to offer the first of the harvest to God, not the last, not what is left over after bills are paid. Ahem. This is a profound stewardship teaching, right here in 2nd Kings. It is almost buried, unless one looks carefully. Elisha knew that this faithful man was bringing his first fruits. He did not keep them, although he received them. He told the man to "Give it to the people and let them eat." There is much in this exchange we could explore with relationship to our Christian understanding of stewardship as well as our understanding of how we, the Church, distribute that which is given.

Continuity

Jesus knew this story and all the rich lore of the Hebrew Bible. He was a Rabbi, an exceptional one. When he demonstrated abundant love for the crowd by feeding them, when he ensured that twelve baskets be provided for the overflow of abundance, Jesus was cementing the relationship between that which has gone before with that which is to come.

Heavenly banquet

The heavenly banquet, that which ultimately is to come, is symbolized in both these passages from 2nd Kings and from John. There will be bread for all in the kingdom of God, and Jesus is the Son of God who shows us the way. John provides a blanket full of signs to point upward, to cause us to think beyond the human plane and enter into the heavenly plane. Jesus' actions of feeding throngs of people with

physical food is one thing. Jesus' actions of feeding the deep hunger of all of us is another.

Feeding that deep hunger which resides in all humankind is the greatest gift of Christianity. Jesus does this. We partake of this spiritual reality by our participation in the sacramental life, particularly in the receipt of Holy Eucharist. Holy Eucharist, which means Holy Thanksgiving, is not a mere act of commemorating the Last Supper of Jesus with his disciples. It is our participation in a mystical event in which that which was ordinary becomes sacred. When ordinary bread and ordinary wine is blessed, consecrated, and made something wholly imbedded in the mystery of Jesus, the Christ, the Anointed One. The One who came to help us be made whole. In Holy Eucharist we experience, at the deepest level, the Real Presence of Christ.

One has to enter into the mystery to be part of the mystery. It is the joy Christianity offers to a world keenly and deeply in need of its balm. There is, indeed, a "balm in Gilead." Gilead, being the place east of the Jordan River, known for its spices and ointments. The "balm of Gilead" is a powerful ointment with healing properties. Metaphorically, Jesus is the "balm of Gilead" with the power to "heal the sin-sick soul," just as the African-American spiritual tell us so poignantly.

Jesus ministered to a people seeking a higher and deeper connection with God. He ministered to people in need of healing. Just as you need. Just as I need. And he is with us through the mystery of Holy Eucharist, he is with us in prayer and he is with us through the love we share with one another. We are sustained spiritually with his balm and our hunger for meaning is found through his abundant love for all of us.

#### St. Mark's Pantry

We can demonstrate some of that love for one another by bringing bread and other foods throughout the next 4 weeks. Fill the baskets we provide each week for St. Mark's Food Pantry with an abundance! Let the bread and other foods we bring symbolize our profound gratitude for the abundance we have in our

personal lives and for the spiritual community of St. James which feeds our souls.

Amen.

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