

Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Cycle B
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception – August 5, 2018
Reverend Robert W. Marshall, Jr., Pastor

As some of you may have heard, my vacation did not go as planned. I intended to spend some time in St. Louis – catching up with some old friends, seeing the renovated Gateway Arch museum and grounds, shopping in favorite local stores, and attending at least one Cardinals game. Alas, the most memorable part of my vacation occurred on my second day in town when I visited the emergency room of St. Anthony Medical Center. It seems that – as I was travelling – a kidney stone inside of me decided to travel as well. Needless to say, once the pain was under control, I came back to Memphis the next day and visited a doctor here. So much for an exciting vacation. I spent the week at home drinking lots of water and waiting for something that – so far, at least – hasn't happened. Before I got stoned – kidney stoned, that is – I did visit one of my favorite St. Louis establishments – Ted Drewes Frozen Custard. But I missed having toasted ravioli, and gooey butter cake, and a salad with Mayfair dressing, and an Amighetti's special sandwich, and so many of the other things that make St. Louis such a great place to visit – and to eat. Many people visit St. Louis for the baseball or the landmarks or the history and culture, but – like me – they come back for the food.

Jesus had developed a little following in Galilee. Word got around that he was curing the sick and people came to see for themselves. But after the incident reported in last Sunday's gospel, after the multiplication of the loaves and the fish – well, the crowds just kept coming. And John tells us that they were persistent. Unable to find Jesus on one side of the Sea of Galilee, the crowd got into boats and began looking for him in Capernaum. These were not the blind and the lame, these were not persons seeking a cure – they were actively following Jesus, as he says, not because they saw signs of the kingdom, but because they ate the loaves and were filled. The cures, the message, had them coming to check Jesus out – but they returned for the food, they returned because they had been fed. That's it, isn't it? Jesus got their attention with parables and cures, but he held their attention with bread. As the old saying goes, the way to the heart is through the stomach. But Jesus' multiplication of loaves and fish was far more than a marketing gimmick. It was a tangible parable of the kingdom of God – for in the kingdom, God not only loves us, he also nourishes and sustains us.

Being fed by the hand of God was an image that the crowds gathered around Jesus understood. Wandering through the desert for forty years, ancient Israel was at the point of starvation when they were miraculously nourished by manna – the

bread from heaven. The Lord God had heard their cry – and responded with bread – not just once, but every day. The Israelites had to go out each day to collect manna – and it would spoil if they tried gathering enough for two or three days. The daily provision of manna helped the Israelites to appreciate their dependence upon God – not just in emergencies, but each and every day. Twelve hundred years later, Jesus had miraculously fed the five thousand – not with manna from the sky, but with five barley loaves and two fish. And like everyone else who eats and is satisfied, they came back to him the next day – to be fed again, or to see if he could do it again, or ultimately just for a sign that they should believe in him. Now, mind you, feeding five thousand with just five loaves and two fish should be a pretty good sign, but this crowd wanted more – just as their ancestors did. After all, the Lord God had delivered them from slavery in Egypt, spared their firstborn, and parted the Red Sea so that they might escape – yet the Israelites grumbled when things got difficult – we were better off as slaves. At least we were well fed! So looking for a sign was nothing new – what was new was Jesus' response.

I am the bread of life, he told them. I am the true bread which came down from heaven and gives life to the world. That's not what they expected to hear. They came looking for another miracle, for another meal – and Jesus was pointing to himself as the bread sent by the Father. He was inviting them to have faith in him – abiding faith, nourishing faith, dependant faith. After the multiplication of the loaves and the fish, the crowd might have accepted Jesus as a prophet, but as the bread of life, well, in the next few weeks we will continue reading from this sixth chapter of John's gospel and, as we will see, that is more than some of them can accept. At times, it is more than many of us are willing to accept.

Oh, we're good at lip service. We profess faith in Christ Jesus – but do we live it? Do we truly look to God for our daily bread and give him thanks when we receive it? Or do we look to ourselves for our nourishment, for our sustenance, and only come to God when our own plans haven't quite worked out? Do we truly see every crust of bread, every breath, every heartbeat as God's gift or do we look for God only when our cupboard is bare, our situation is dire, our health is challenged by a kidney stone or something worse? God offers us a relationship when often we are only looking for an insurance policy. I want to live my own life without God – until I decide that I need him, of course. A relationship doesn't work that way, especially a relationship with God. You and I eat every day – and, if you are at all like me – you haven't missed many meals. Do we pray every day? Do we recognize our dependence on God every day? Are we so busy looking for food that will leave us hungry in a few hours that we miss the food that will satisfy us? Do we recognize the Bread of Life when he is in our midst?