

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 17<sup>TH</sup>. SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME  
2 Kings 4: 42-44 Psalm 145 Ephesians 4: 1-6 John 6: 1-15

Dear Preachers:

The past three weeks we had been hearing sequential readings from Mark. Beginning today, till almost the end of the summer, we will have gospel selections from John 6. In his gospel, John narrates only seven miraculous acts by Jesus, and he names them—"signs." He sees these signs as a special revelation about Jesus and in each, the believer is brought close to the all-powerful and resurrected Lord. We not only witness a miraculous deed performed by Jesus, but through the sign we are invited to step closer for a more thorough reflection on what it says about Jesus. The signs John narrates help those with eyes of faith to see—to believe in Jesus in the ways each sign reveals him to us.

Today we have the sign of the multiplication. In subsequent weeks we will hear the additional reflections on this sign John provides to help us come to faith in Jesus as the Bread of Life and Wisdom sent down from God. John is not a casual writer, through his narration, with its multi-layered symbolism, we come to see more and more about who Jesus is. Remember what John said towards the end of his gospel, where he states his purpose for writing quite clearly, "Jesus performed many other signs as well, signs not recorded here, in the presence of his disciples. But these have been recorded to help you believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, so that through this faith, you may have life in his name" (20: 30-31). We now focus on one of these signs so that in "seeing" it we might grow in faith.

A large crowd has sought Jesus out. Unlike the Synoptic gospels, John doesn't say that Jesus expresses pity for the hungry crowd, or that they are like lost sheep without a shepherd. Instead, Jesus opens with a question to Philip about where "we" will get enough food for the approaching crowd. John tells us quite plainly that Jesus is "testing" his disciples. The story has us focus on how the disciples will respond to this test and what Jesus' own response will be. Of course, we too are being "tested" as we apply the story to our lives.

Which gives us pause to ask, what's the test for us? Is it that we too must face the many needs of family, friends, church, world and that we feel overwhelmed or "crowded" by them? How shall we feed them? Is the test the questions that are put before us when we realize that for the really important issues and areas of our

lives we do not have enough "bread"? The story today shows both the disciples and Jesus looking at the same needs. The disciples don't exaggerate the problem; they evaluate their meager resources and what will be required of them and then express incredulity, "how are we going to feed them?" They are not blind or indifferent to the needs and they seem to want to address them but just can't figure out how they will do it. It is just too much for them. Jesus is also looking at the same hungers and he takes charge.

Doing the work Jesus has calls us to do does not always seem possible. Listen to Andrew's comment when he reports the little they have, "What is that among so many?" Andrew and the disciples are realistic enough. But they have not factored in the One who is looking with them at the problem and what he may have in mind. We look around at our world and it has enormous hungers for peace, community, meaning and wholeness. We, who do so many good and varied ministries, both as ordained and lay people, wonder if we have what it takes to make a difference, to touch the hearts, minds and wills of our neighbors, to improve their lives and the life of the world. A tall order indeed! "Where can we buy enough food...", to have that kind of impact? We can't. But we don't have to do it on our own; Jesus looks with us and knows "what he [is] going to do" through us to feed the crowds.

Early in the story we learn that, "the feast of Passover was near." That is an important detail that helps us understand the meaning of this sign. Believers hearing this detail are nudged by the mention of the Passover to make links: it was at the Passover meal that Jesus ate with his disciples. During the meal he told them about his death. While the Synoptic used eucharistic language to describe the multiplication miracle, John draws out the meaning of this sign with a long discourse about Jesus' giving his flesh and blood. In the next weeks we will hear John inviting us to look beyond the bread that was given the crowds and see the Bread of Life that is really being offered to feed us. The crowds want bread, an immediate satisfaction for empty stomachs. John is saying that Jesus is going to satisfy their still deeper hungers. Moses provided bread for the Israelites in the desert--- day by day. But it only satisfied the people's hungers for a while. Then they would be hungry again. While John will elaborate in subsequent weeks, he has already opened a door and invited us to "see."

The crowds don't get what is really happening. They see a powerful work, but not the meaning of the sign that just happened. They got their bellies full, but their

spirits are still hungry. They don't see that Jesus is the very bread that can feed them so that they will never be hungry again. What does it take to fill us up? What bread do we reach out for, and does it hold true and lasting value for us? Will that bread be with us through life's difficult journeys or will it run out and not be bread at all—just cotton candy? The appetite that drives people towards other, less substantial, breads—status, property, the latest gadgets, etc., is insatiable. Yet, when what we thought we wanted is possessed, we eventually still want more, or want a more up-to-date version. We are what we eat. If we hunger for and try to satisfy ourselves with food that doesn't nourish, we will soon realize we are still hungry and we are unfulfilled people.

When we have a sleepless night, what is on our mind? What are the middle-of-the-night ghosts that we don't like to think about during the daylight, the areas where our lives are askew and energies misplaced? Those concerns and hungers for direction are the places where we need the true bread. We need nourishment that goes down deep to the place where we set our priorities; we need the bread to direct us. We want a food that will help keep us focused on what is really important and lasting. If that is what we want and if we are what we eat, then it makes sense to eat the Bread of Life, Jesus. We aren't just seeking his comforting presence. He has more to offer. John tells us that the people call him "the Prophet, the one who is to come into the world." And prophet he is. His life is to be the pattern we follow in our lives, for we too are called upon to feed others. The way we can feed them is to act in the world in ways that clearly identify us with Jesus.

To make room for the bread that Jesus offers---- we must starve judging and feed on kindness; starve indifference and feed on compassion; starve isolation and feed on community; starve selfishness and feed on generosity. The old self must go hungry and the life of Jesus must feed and expand our spirits. Now at this eucharist we are like the hungry crowd. But we haven't come here for momentary satisfaction. We have been present to the sign John narrates for us. We know there is only one true and lasting nourishment, and we have come to receive it, the Bread of Life, Jesus Christ.

I'll end with a story told by John K Bergland (*Abingdon Preacher's Annual* 1991, John K Bergland ed. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990, page 210-11).

A holy man was resting beneath a tree at the outskirts of a city. He was interrupted by a man who ran to him, saying, "The stone! Give me the stone! Please, give me the stone." "What stone?" asked the holy man. Then the man told how an angel

had appeared to him in a dream and told him that he would find a pilgrim just outside the city who would give him a stone and make him rich forever.

The holy man reached into his pocket and pulled out a great diamond. "The angel probably spoke of this," he said. "I found it on my journey here. If you truly want it, you may have it."

The diamond was as big as his fist and perfect in every way. The man marveled at its beauty, clutched it eagerly and walked away from the pilgrim. That night he could not sleep.

Before it was light, he went out to find the holy man. At dawn he woke the pilgrim, saying, "The wealth! Give me the wealth! Please, give me the wealth that lets you so easily give away the diamond."

### JUSTICE NOTES

*From Words to Deeds: Continuing Reflections on the Role of Women in the Church*

(Committee on Women in Society and in the Church, National Conference of Catholic Bishops)

Pastoral Suggestions:

—Use existing opportunities to educate all the Christian faithful, and especially those who hold, or are preparing for pastoral leadership positions (priests, deacons, seminarians, religious and lay ministers) about the Church's teaching regarding women's gifts, women's equality with men and the implications of that teaching.

This can be done as part of seminaries' curricula, continuing education for priests and deacons, and adult education and formation programs. See *Strengthening the Bonds of Peace: Parish Resource Packet*, for additional ideas and discussion and workshop guides.

--Ensure that the teaching on women's gifts and equality is reflected in programs and policies. Some dioceses have found women's commissions or offices to be an effective means of promoting the Church's teaching about women's equality.

Others have used an existing diocesan women's organization in the effort....

—Periodically review parish, diocesan and organizational programs to ensure cultural and gender awareness and sensitivity.

—When writing the history of dioceses, parishes and organization, be sure to include the contributions of lay and religious women. Use Women's History Month, celebrated each March to publicize these contributions....

—Appoint qualified women to leadership and decision-making positions, as allowed by canon law....

—Employ women as spokespersons for the local Church.

- Offer leadership training for women so that they can more effectively carry out the Church's mission to society, for example, as legislative advocates and as community anti-violence activists.
- Appoint an advisory committee or similar group to track progress on these suggestions and periodically evaluate the findings.....
- Use inclusive language as permitted, e.g., in catechetical and religious materials and hymnals, in daily language, and in prayer and preaching. Sensitive use of language helps to build a foundation for collaboration by acknowledging the presence and participation of women.

### POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I am posting in this space several inmates' names and locations. I invite you to write a postcard to one or more of them to let them know that: we have not forgotten them; are praying for them and their families; or whatever personal encouragement you might like to give them. If you like, tell them you heard about them through North Carolina's, *"People of Faith Against the Death Penalty."*

Thanks, Jude Siciliano, OP

Please write to:.....

- Stacey A. Tyler #0414853 (On death row since 11/14/95)
- Davy G. Stephens #0388922 (12/20/95)
- Russell Tucker #0413011 (2/21/96)
- Kenneth Neal #0495163 (2/26/96)

-----Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, NC 27606

### ANNOUNCEMENTS

Our webpage addresses: <https://www.PreacherExchange.com>

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Thank you.

“Blessings on your preaching”, Jude Siciliano, OP - [FrJude@JudeOP.org](mailto:FrJude@JudeOP.org)