18th Sunday Ordinary Year B

"He gave them bread from the heavens to eat." John 6:31

There are a couple of times during the church year that I particularly love. One is right after Easter when we read through the whole books of Acts. This is the story of our Church and its early development. The other is this time of year when we read through the sixth chapter of John – the Bread of Life Discourse. You may be familiar with the Old Testament being referred to as the “Hebrew Scriptures” and the New Testament being called the “Christian Scriptures?” Well if that’s the case, John Chapter 6 is all Catholic. It is Christ’s mandate that establishes our Eucharistic celebration and is the chapter that has been abandoned by all other faiths!

So, we will read this chapter for four consecutive Sundays. There is a distinct, intentional progression in the words of Jesus regarding our response to this heavenly bread.

During the first part of the discourse, Jesus emphasizes that we must believe He is the Bread of Life. The word **believe** is used four times from verses 29 through 47. Jesus teaches that we must believe in Him, and accordingly, believe the truths He is revealing. "I am the Bread of Life. No one who comes to Me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in Me wiil ever thirst" (Jn 6:35).

Jesus makes an abrupt, intentional transition in the last half of the discourse. He stops using the word **"believe"** and begins using verbs and nouns referring to eating and drinking. For nine consecutive verses, 50 through 58, the verbs eat and drink or nouns for food and drink are used. "If anyone eats this bread he will live forever" (Jn 6:51). "Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you do not have life in you" (Jn 6:53). "Whoever eats this bread shall live forever" (Jn 6:58).

Jesus clearly states that anyone who believes in Him will take the next step and eat His eucharistic flesh. His initial hearers understood exactly the progression Jesus was making; they just refused to obey and eat (Jn 6:60ff).

Is there anything in this life that can truly satisfy our deepest hunger and longing? Many sought Jesus out because he offered them something no one else could give - bread from heaven from the very hand of God himself. When Jesus had performed the miracle of multiplying five loaves of bread and two fish to provide a refreshing and satisfying meal for more than 5000 people (see John 6:1-15), they wanted to make him their king - no doubt because they wanted more. When Jesus withdrew from the crowd and quietly returned to Capernaum to be with his twelve disciples, they ran to seek him there (John 6:24-25). Jesus met them with a probing question - are you looking for physical food that perishes or food that gives eternal life?

The Jews had always regarded the manna in the wilderness as the bread of God (Psalm 78:24, Exodus 16:15). There was a strong belief that when the Messiah came he would give manna from heaven. This was the supreme work of Moses. Now the Jewish leaders were demanding that Jesus produce manna from heaven as proof to his claim to be the Messiah. Jesus responds by telling them that it was not Moses who gave the manna, but God. And the manna given to Moses and the people was not the real bread from heaven, but only a symbol of the bread to come.

Jesus makes the claim which only God can make: I am the bread of life. The bread which Jesus offers is none else than the very life of God. This is the true bread which can truly satisfy the hunger in our hearts. The manna from heaven prefigured the superabundance of the unique bread of the Eucharist or Lord's Supper which Jesus gave to his disciples on the eve of his sacrifice. The manna in the wilderness sustained the Israelites on their journey to the Promised Land. It could not produce eternal life for the Israelites.

Jesus alone can satisfy our deepest hunger for love - the love of God that knows no end, that never fails nor forsakes us, that outlasts sin and death. Jesus alone can satisfy the eternal hunger of our heart, mind, and spirit.

What about you? What will you do in response to Jesus' clear words? "Unless you eat..."