

Seventh Sunday of Easter
May 17, 2015
Homily for the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass
of
St. Thomas More Catholic Parish
celebrated at
St. Joseph Catholic Church
Scranton, PA
John 17:11b-19

As we celebrate this day that six of our young people will receive their First Holy Communion, I want you to remember the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand. On that day Jesus multiplied the loaves and fishes. A little boy gave five barley loaves and two fish, and Jesus was able to feed five thousand men, along with women and children.

After he fed them, he at first withdrew to pray, but then he crossed the lake to a town called Capernaum. You know what the five thousand people did? They followed Jesus and met Him there because they had eaten their fill and they wanted more bread and fish. So there was this huge number of people who had witnessed the miracle and then had run after Jesus; but we know they didn't all believe in Him.

Do you know how we know that for sure? Well, our lesson from Acts today takes place after Jesus' Resurrection, after Jesus had ascended into heaven. It tells about how Matthias was chosen to take the place of Judas Iscariot, the disciple who betrayed Jesus. But in telling us that story, St. Luke also reveals just how large the Church was in the days before Pentecost, when the apostles received the gift of the Holy Spirit. Did anybody hear that number? Was it five thousand people? All those people who had eaten the loaves and fishes were still following Jesus? No, they weren't. "The company of persons was in all about a hundred and twenty." There are more people than that here today. Imagine that the entire Catholic Church was so small that there were fewer Christians that day than are at Mass here today! What happened?

It's good that today is First Holy Communion, because that has a lot to do with what happened and why the five thousand that were fed the loaves and fishes dwindled down to just a hundred and twenty. You see, Jesus told those who followed Him something that caused many of His disciples to walk away. St. John tells us in Chapter 6 of his Gospel, "After this, many of [Jesus'] disciples drew back and no longer went about with him." What could Jesus have said that led so many of His disciples to draw back and no longer follow our Lord?

What He said was this: "Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you; he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed. He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me and I in him."

He said what we learned in First Holy Communion class, that to receive Holy Communion is to receive Jesus Himself, Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity. Receiving Jesus in Holy Communion accomplishes what Jesus prayed for in today's Gospel from John, Chapter 17: "Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one." When we receive Jesus in Holy Communion, we become one with God, because Jesus is one with the Father. We receive God, not just in Spirit, but in the Flesh!

That made people think of cannibalism, like in the movie that's going to come out later this year. Ron Howard is making a movie about a sperm whale that sunk a whaling ship in 1820 in the South Pacific Ocean. To live longer, the survivors ate their fellow sailors who had died. In one case, they even killed the youngest sailor so they could eat him. It's a true story, but I'm not sure I'll go see it on the big screen. Eating people doesn't give us eternal life, does it? Killing people and eating them won't get us to heaven, will it? More likely it will send us to hell, where we don't want to go.

So how is eating Jesus different? Remember from our class that Jesus is the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. Jesus is the new Passover Lamb. Remember how the Jews escaped from Egypt, where they were slaves. The blood of the lambs they sacrificed marked their houses, and the Lord "passed over" them, and their first-born sons lived. When we eat the flesh of the Lamb of God and drink His Blood, God "passes over" our sins. We do not perish, but instead receive eternal life.

Eating Jesus isn't like eating another person, because Jesus is also God. The people that walked away did not believe this. Those many disciples that heard Jesus say we have to eat His Flesh and drink His Blood and then drew back—they thought Jesus was just another miracle worker who was able to give them a hearty meal. So Jesus asked the twelve, "Do you also wish to go away?" St. Peter, our first pope, answered for the twelve. He said, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life; and we have believed, and have come to know that you are the Holy One of God." They didn't completely understand, but they trusted that since God had said it, then it had to be true.

Today, a lot more than a hundred and twenty people believe in Jesus, believe that He is the Son of God, who gives us His flesh and Blood so that we can go to heaven. That's because they know that Jesus died on the cross for them and then rose from the dead. The miracle of the Resurrection confirmed that what Jesus said about eating His Flesh and drinking His Blood was true. Along with the disciples who stayed with Jesus, people down through the ages have understood that this sacrifice Jesus made for us was an awesome expression of His love for us. He gives us His Body and Blood because He loves us, and He wants us to spend forever with Him.

So why can't Jesus just die and rise again? Why can't that be enough? Why do we then have to go to Holy Communion to get to heaven?

Remember how we said that taking Holy Communion means we have union with God? Well, Holy Communion enables us, gives us the strength we need, to love like God loves. The love of the cross is very hard. So I'll ask our six children who are to receive Holy Communion today, "Who wants to get crucified today? Do we have any volunteers?" That sounds pretty scary, doesn't it? But that's what receiving Holy Communion means: I volunteer to be crucified today. I love my neighbor so much, that just as Jesus died for me, I will lay down my life for him.

The people walked away, and people walk away still today, because love like that sounds like a bridge too far; they don't want to love if love will be that hard. But receiving Holy Communion is not only about volunteering to be crucified. It's also about getting the strength we need to do what we can't do on our own.

Being Catholic and receiving Holy Communion every week makes a difference. Instead of killing our weak neighbors and eating them so that we can live, we lay down our lives so that our weak neighbors can live. We receive Jesus so that volunteering to be crucified today doesn't sound so crazy, if it means the people we love might get to heaven with us. To be one with Jesus means we love like He loves, and the world is better for it. The world is getting better today because you're receiving Holy Communion, since it will give you what you need to love like God loves.