

Dear Friends in Christ,

We have been reading from the 6th chapter of the Gospel according to St. John throughout this past week. I have always found this particular gospel both fascinating and challenging. It is fascinating because while there is a Last Supper account in John's Gospel, he doesn't have Jesus passing the bread around saying, "Take this all of you and eat it, this is my body which will be given up for you." Nor does Jesus pass the cup saying, "Take this all of you and drink from it, this is the cup of my blood, the blood of the new and everlasting covenant. It will be shed for you and for all so that sins may be forgiven. Do this in memory of me." Instead, John begins the 6th chapter with Jesus feeding the crowd of 5,000 people with 5 loaves of bread and 2 fish. This miracle is in all 4 gospels, but for John, this miracle points to the Eucharist because he has Jesus looking up to heaven and giving thanks for the bread and fish, then he blesses it, and passes it out to the crowd.

This 6th chapter of John's gospel is challenging because the next day the crowd follows Jesus and the disciples to the other side of the lake, the Sea of Galilee, at which point Jesus enters into a dialogue about the fact that he comes from the Father, and that he is the bread of life. In fact, this section of John's Gospel is called the "Bread of Life Discourse". We will be hearing it again in greater detail later this summer. Now, this crowd of Jewish people finds it hard to believe what Jesus is saying. God provided Manna for their ancestors in the desert during the exodus from Egypt, now this rabbi from Nazareth is calling himself the Bread of Life. They wonder if he is even more important than Moses, or Abraham. They also wonder about how it is possible for them to eat his flesh and drink his blood. This all sounds so strange; it was impossible for them to believe. At the end of this gospel, that entire crowd of Jewish people, who were convinced the day before that Jesus was the One sent by God because he fed them, walked away. Jesus' message was just too challenging for them.

A faith that is not challenged cannot grow. It is so easy for us to get stuck in a model of believing we can be comfortable with, but what happens when our faith is challenged? What do we do when we start hearing about the need to put aside our prejudices and love all our neighbors even if they are from the Middle East, or Mexico, or if they have different colored skin?

Often times people simply ignore this message. This may not be as dramatic as walking away, but when we ignore the *Gospel* call to "Love our enemies," our faith is not challenged, it will not grow.

This happens also when people leave the parish because, "All father talks about is money." The message of stewardship is very important because it's not just about money; it's really about how we are to live as Christian disciples, followers of Jesus Christ. It takes great faith to live as Christian stewards of all God has given us, but if we are convinced that what we have is ours, and ours alone, and we refuse to see it any other way, our faith is not challenged, it will not grow.

At the end of chapter 6 of John's *Gospel* Jesus asks his disciples, "And what about you, do you want to leave me too?" Peter is the one who responds, "Lord you have the words of everlasting life. To whom else can we go?" In the same way Jesus challenged the faith of that crowd of people and the disciples, we are challenged by Peter to see that Jesus is the only way for us to go if we desire salvation. His word, the *Gospel*, is the model upon which we must build our lives of faith. And the gospel message is radical; challenging, sometimes beyond belief. But where else can we go?

As this Easter season continues, let us strive to listen carefully to the *Gospel*. Let us also realize that we are strengthened by the Eucharist to be faithful followers who strive to put the gospel message to good use in our lives. By doing so we shall see that when our faith is challenged it not only grows, but it becomes the most precious gift of our lives.

In joyful hope,  
Fr. Tim Seigel