

“Take In and Offer: Bread, Fish, Water, Christ”

A Meditation for the North American Association of the Catechumenate
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based on John 6:1-21

Sidney D. Fowler, Minister for Worship, Liturgy, and Spiritual Formation,
Local Church Ministries, United Church of Christ, Cleveland, Ohio

*I invite you to pray in the silence, that between the
speaking of the Word and our hearing, God will come
and we will be changed. . . .*

*May the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts
be acceptable to you, O God, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.*

I

What came to your heart, your mind, your imagination
when you heard
the Gospel read this morning?

Come again. Come close to the water, come to the mountainside,
where Jesus became Bread and Fish.
For John, it is near the time of Passover,
a time of liberation and manna for the Hebrew children,
a time to share a meal embodying God's acts of liberation and redemption.
For John in his Gospel, this meal functions as the Passover meal, a "last supper."

A large crowd gathers and Jesus inquires of Philip,
"Where are we to get money to feed all these people?"
Philip calculates the costs and replies,
"It would take a lot of work and money to cover the cost of such a picnic banquet."
Philip does not yet fully see Jesus, the Bread, standing before him.
Andrew grabs what he can and calls out for a child with five loaves and two fish.
The boy offers and Jesus takes, accepts, the gifts.

You know the story from there. You've been there before.
Jesus takes the loaves, gives thanks, and
passes out as much bread and fish as the people wanted.
So much was left over, like manna in the wilderness,
they gather up the fragments —
and so the meal continues and continues until today.

After the meal,
the crowd imaged Jesus as “king” who could supply their physical needs.
Like Philip, they did not image Jesus
as Bread and Fish who could fill all longings
A “king” was not an image Jesus chose to en-flesh.
So Jesus withdrew.

Later the disciples left the mountain and went out on a boat on the sea.
Seemed they needed the time apart as well.
But the sea became rough and they were terrified.
Ahead of them, on the water, Jesus, born of water, walked on water.
He came to them and said. “It is I, do not be afraid.”

II

The Gospel of Saint John, you probably know,
takes a different spin on the accounts of Jesus than
the Synoptics of Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

Some have said this gospel is more theological, more philosophical.
All the gospels, however, are thick with stories and theology of Jesus.
What is distinctive here is how
John turns stories about Jesus
into images of Jesus.

In John,
Jesus is Word, Shepherd, Light.
Jesus is Door, Living Water, Vinedresser, and the Way.

And in today's Gospel reading,
the miracle of bread and fish is the story
from which John will claim later in the chapter
“Jesus is the bread of life.”
Like the other gospels, in John's Gospel,

Jesus is teacher, prophet, healer, a doer.
But in addition, in this gospel,
Jesus bears within his very own body and being the fullness
of God's revelation in the ordinary and holy stuff of life.
Here, the "hidden world of God" is revealed in the common stuff
and revealed in Jesus.

In this gospel, Jesus is before us —
not as a king or a theological platform or a story to be memorized.
Jesus is before us —
our bread, our water, our fish, our truth, our life.
Jesus offers more than we may calculate or expect.
The miracle story holds within it the fullness of who Jesus is
as portrayed in the gospel of John.
Summarized in John 10, Jesus comes that we may have life abundant.

The boy in the story understood that.
Can you imagine what an impression that event had on him?
The boy gave what he had and "poof" in Jesus' hands,
the gift of the boy fed the crowd.
Can you imagine his joy?
He understood what abundance Jesus, the Bread and Fish, could bring.
We have such an abundant life
when we are open, take in, and offer
the fullness of Christ.

III

*<Each congregant has a color copy of Eucharistic Loaves and Fishes, c. 3rd century,
catacomb of San Callisto, Crypt of Lucina, Rome>*

You have before you an image of fish and loaves
from the catacomb of San Callisto in Rome.
Within the large complex of burial chambers,
this simple painting is found in the Crypt of Lucina.
The catacombs, as scholars now hold, were not places
of clandestine meetings of persecuted Christians.
They were places of burial for Christians as they were for Romans.
Here they placed their dead.
Here also they shared a funeral meal surrounded by images of Christ.
At the end of life, celebrating the life of a Christian,
they ate and gazed upon images often common in the Roman culture.

But in their gazing the images were transformed into images of and about Christ.
The moment was full — even at death, life was abundant.
Take a moment, gaze on this image.
Consider “Why would early Christians choose this image
for the walls of the place that held their loved ones and where they shared a funeral meal?
What might the image offer you, us, today?”

<A time of silent “holy gazing” and mediation.>

Before any human depictions of Jesus,
the early Christians painted the images for whom Jesus had become to them.
In this image, the basket of loaves rests on a single, floppy wet fish.
Both images bread and fish were full of meaning for these Christians.

Bread *<holding a “loaf”>*:
offered by a child, changed by Jesus; sustenance; life; Eucharist; manna
gathered and scattered; forever fed in Jesus the Living Bread.

Fish *<making the “sign of the fish”>*:
born of water; food; sign of Christ’s presence; *Ichthus* the acrostic affirmation for Jesus Christ,
God’s Child, Savior.
Laurence Stookey reminds us, “what we have not been told is that the sign of the fish
was also a reminder that through the water of baptism Christians
become the first living creatures of the New Creation.”

IV

God works through story and image together.
Take in the fullness of Christ.
It is Christ, do not be afraid.

Take in Christ at birth, at death, at baptism, at table, at sea, on the mountainside.
Take in Christ, do not settle for stories about, or worship about, or thoughts about, or
even hopes about.
Take in Christ in our catechumenate ministry, our work of justice and
compassion, in our worship.

Take in the Living Bread, the Fish, the Living Water.
Take in Christ, the fullness of God and life abundant.
Take in and offer Christ, Holy Wisdom, Holy Word.

Amen.