

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

July 17/30 2023

Gospel: Matt. 14:14-22 (Feeding the Five Thousand)

Sermon (Dcn. Arsenios)

Christ is in our midst.

“Feed my lambs. . . . Feed my sheep.” (John 21:15, 17) With these words, which we heard in John’s Gospel at Matins on the recent Feast of Sts. Peter and Paul, Jesus commissioned Peter to lead His flock. Feeding the multitude frequently is used as a metaphor for teaching, nourishing, encouraging, leading the followers of Christ.

In today’s Gospel, the disciples of Jesus come to Him with a concern. It’s near day’s end, the people who have been listening to Jesus are hungry and have no food. Send them home? Jesus replies very simply, “Give them something to eat.” (14:16)

The disciples weren’t paying attention to the teachings about the birds of the air who do not go hungry, even though they “neither sow nor reap” (6:26), which we heard a few weeks ago. So they continue their questioning, “Where shall we get food?” Jesus has to lay it out for them: He blesses the five loaves of bread and the two dried fishes that they do have and tells His disciples to hand them out to the people. (14:19)

An apparent miracle occurs, so wonderful that it is recorded exactly the same way in all four Gospels. *Everyone* – five thousand men and the accompanying women and children – has enough to eat. And twelve baskets of leftover fragments are gathered up!

What is this miraculous bread? It’s more than the manna with which God fed the Jewish nation in the desert. There were no leftovers in the desert; and even if someone tried to save some, it spoiled overnight. (Ex. 16:14-21) And, unlike virtually all the other miracles mentioned in

the Gospels, this miracle directly affected everyone in a crowd of thousands. It wasn't simply observed by them.

In John's Gospel the account of this miracle is followed the next day by Jesus' teaching about the Bread of Life. Jesus taught the crowd:

“You seek Me, not because you saw the signs, but because you ate of the loaves and were filled. Do not labor for food which perishes, but for the food which endures to everlasting life, which the Son of Man will give you, because God the Father has set His seal on Him.”

Then they said to Him, “What shall we do that we may work the works of God?”

Jesus answered and said to them, “This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He sent.”

Therefore they said to Him, “What sign will You perform then, that we may see it and believe You? What work will You do? Our fathers ate the manna in the desert; as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’”

Then Jesus said to them, “. . . Moses did not give you the bread from heaven, but My Father gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is He who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.”

Then they said to Him, “Lord, give us this bread always.”
[Notice the echo of the Samaritan woman's request for the Living Water. (John 4:15)]

And Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life. He who comes to me shall never hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst. . . . This is the will of Him Who sent me, that everyone who sees the son and believes in Him may have everlasting life; and I will raise him up at the last day.” (John 6:26-35, 40)

We pray for this Heavenly Bread every time we say the Lord's prayer. “Give us this day our ἐπιούσιον (epi-ousion) bread.” Yes, the original Greek both in Matthew's gospel and in Luke's gospel uses a made-up

word, ἐπιούσιον, which appears nowhere else in Ancient Greek texts. Perhaps it is derived from an untranslatable word in Aramaic or Hebrew. The most literal meaning of this word is “super-substantial”, that is, “above-or-beyond essence.” In fact, “superstantialem” is the way St. Jerome translated ἐπιούσιον into Latin in his translation of Matthew’s Gospel for the Western Church in 382 AD. But then, for some unknown reason, he translated the same word as “quotidianam” (in English, “daily”) when it appeared in Luke’s Gospel. So we can say, more accurately, that Jesus taught us to pray, “Give us today the Super-Essential Bread,” (that is, the Bread of Life).

In the next chapter, Matthew records a second miraculous feeding of the multitude, this time four thousand men plus women and children. His disciples still have not learned their lesson. Once again they asked Jesus what to do. Once again Jesus blessed the available loaves and a few dried fishes and bade His disciples to distribute them. This time, seven large baskets of fragments were gathered up.

This is not a duplicate mention of a single miracle. In Matthew’s gospel, Jesus Himself describes both occasions a little later, saying, when giving a warning about the “leaven” of the Pharisees,

“Do you not . . . remember the five loaves of the five thousand and how many baskets you took up? Nor the seven loaves of the four thousand? And how many large baskets you took up? How is it that you did not understand [what I did then]?” (16:9-11)

Let us pray every day that God give to us this *Super-substantial Bread* which is Jesus Christ, who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.

Amen.