Not by Bread Alone

Give us this bread always. That really is the goal of our scripture readings, last week, this week, and the next two weeks: to lead us from reflecting and praying about hunger and thirst, to being nourished with daily bread, to eternal life, beyond hunger and thirst.

Chapter six in John’s Gospel takes us from the multiplication of the loaves and fish last week, a miracle to feed a hungry crowd, to connecting that miracle with an earlier one, the manna in the desert, to contemplating Jesus as the Bread of Life, to seeing and receiving the Eucharist as food for our journey into eternity.

Here is how I would like to proceed today. Let’s reflect on a variety of hungers that we might bring with us to Mass, and see how the first half of the Mass, the Liturgy of the Word, can serve as God’s response to those hungers. Next week we can take it the following step, and probe how the Lord feeds us in the second half of the Mass, the Liturgy of the Eucharist.

The first thought that came to me reflecting on hunger is the amazing way our system is wired. Its summer time. We’ve had some very hot days. If we work outside in the heat, run, or exercise, without any conscious thought, our body craves salty foods. We grab some, and our sodium level gets replenished. Even as I reach for a little bag of potato chips, I know they are loaded with fat, but that craving for salt seems irresistible.

When we are ill, we crave more sleep without any conscious thought, so our body can kick into repair mode.

We may not even know why we are here today, but chances are, there is some spiritual need we may not even be aware of, a need our spirit is longing to have filled.

Before I proceed, let me say that as we reflect on hungers and thirsts, it will be tremendously valuable to consider more than just the hunger or thirst we each bring with us. There is God’s hunger, God’s thirst too. On the Sunday in Lent when we meet the Woman at the Well, the missal puts it this way:

“For when he (Jesus) asked the Samaritan woman for a drink, he had already created the gift of faith in her, and so ardently did he thirst for her faith, that he kindled in her the fire of divine love.”

We come with hungers and thirsts. The Lord thirsts for our faith. Here in the Eucharist, those hungers meet, and can be satisfied. So let me simply walk through the first half of Mass, the Liturgy of the Word.

No matter how much we enjoy alone time, we all have a need to belong, to be part of a family. It a basic human need, a hunger. When we begin Mass singing together, giving praise to God is part of the story. But the opening song also draws us together in a common purpose. We belong to this praying assembly. It’s not any one person’s song, It’s our song. The church’s song. Not just everyone here – we connect with everyone who has ever prayed in this place, with Christians around the world, with angels and saints!
We don’t just gather any ole place, we gather under the cross. We come together with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The opening dialogue between presider and congregation reinforces the message and the experience – we are here together, and the Lord is with us!

The Lord hungers for us to be open to one another, to become a community, while we hunger to belong. In the opening rites, those hungers meet.

Don’t you at times really hunger to be able to leave baggage behind? To leave behind sins, failures, brokenness? To have a fresh start? To feel like it is ok to be at the table? In the penitential act, we acknowledge as a community, as well as individuals, we aren’t ready on our own to come to the table. We need to wash up. But just as Jesus washed the feet of his disciples at the last supper, it is his hunger to cleanse us and wash us in mercy that meets our need for forgiveness in the penitential act. May almighty God have mercy on us ….

I love the last phrase in the hymn, “Love Divine All Loves Excelling.” Lost in wonder, love and praise. Sometimes, when I focus on the wonder of this world, looking at the blessings instead of tragedies, I have a hunger, a deep desire to lose myself in wonder, love and praise. The Gloria provides an opportunity True, it may be more obvious during Christmas or Easter when we have a festive, sung Gloria, but even reciting it can fill a hunger if we give it a chance.

Let us pray …. Hunger meets hunger. Our hunger to connect with God meets God’s hunger for our faith. We connect in the opening prayer.

Along with a primal need, a hunger for community, to belong, a hunger to be accepted and forgiven, and a hunger to connect with God, don’t we all have a hunger to find meaning in the crazy events that swirl around us? Violence, political craziness, goofy things that can happen in our families; anywhere you have people, there are bound to be things we struggle to make sense of. Sometimes it’s a challenge just to make sense of the thoughts that can preoccupy us. The scripture readings are about finding meaning in the ups and downs of daily life, and naming grace. One of the beautiful images that emerged after the 2nd Vatican Council was to refer to the scripture readings as “the Table of the Word.” Just as we are fed at the Table of the Eucharist, we are fed at the Table of the Word. The scripture readings are a buffet of meaning.

In the first reading, we hear how God continually reached out to folks in the Old Testament. We experience God’s prophets teaching. We hear how God’s relationship with the people grew. The fits and starts, the failures and the mercy. God acted in human history, despite human sinfulness, and there is always a grace to be found.

The psalm provides a prayer response. Here is how someone prayed long ago. Over the centuries, people have found that these psalm prayers helped them to pray, to put into words what they need to express. A hunger to put into words what we need to say to God can be satisfied through the psalm.

On the buffet, we also find wisdom and insights from the early church. In writing to the Corinthians, St. Paul’s spoke about the movement from receiving milk, to solid food. Infants like
those baptized today count on milk. Soon they will be ready for solid food. What we are able to digest changes over time – so to with digesting what God communicates to us through the scriptures. There is always something good for us on the buffet.

The main course: encountering the Lord of Life, Jesus, in the Gospel. When we allow him to speak to our heart, there is nothing that can better satisfy our hunger for meaning. In fact, he has so much to offer, that as we heard last week, there are likely to be leftovers we can take home!

Next comes the homily. Here is just one possible way to look at it. Have you ever gone to a restaurant with someone who has eaten there many times before? Have you ever asked, “What is good here?” or “What would you recommend?” I chew of the scriptures a lot, especially when preparing to preach. So the homily is one recommendation about some of the items on the menu. Just remember, this is one full menu! You may find something different calls to you. That’s the beauty!

Next we profess our faith. We hunger to have something to believe in, a foundation to stand firm on; God hunger for our faith. These two connect as we recite the creed.

Yet another hunger: We hunger to know that God cares about our concerns. God longs for us to truly care about one another, and to trust in His providence. These meet in the prayer of the faithful, the intercessions.

We wrap up the Liturgy of the Word with the collection, and preparation of the gifts. We can express our gratitude, our generosity; that meets God’s desire that we learn to give of ourselves, as his Son gave his very life as an offering. It all sets the table, sets the stage for the paschal sacrifice, for the holy meal. And that will lead us to next week’s homily.

Please be sure to read the reflections on the front page and the scripture page in the bulletin.

One last thought. I am sure many of us have worked to understand various cravings that come from our body’s needs, or those of our mind, or our emotional needs. Let’s try to do the same work in exploring what our spirit may be craving.

“Do not work for food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you.”