

Reflection for the 18th Sunday in Ordinary Time

I am the Bread of life. You who come to me shall not hunger; and who believe in me shall not thirst. No one can come to me unless the father beckons. And I will raise you up, and I will raise you up, and I will raise you up on the last day. By Sister Suzanne Toolan R.S.M.

The song "*I am the Bread of Life*" was written in 1964 by Sister Suzanne Toolan for a San Francisco Archdiocesan event. Sister Suzanne relates that she was teaching High School at the time when she wrote the song during her free period, using chapters 6 and 10 of the Gospel of John. When the bell rang for the next class Sr. Suzanne decided that she did not like the song, so she tore it up and threw it in the wastepaper basket. When Sister left her classroom a student who was in the infirmary across the hall from Sister's classroom came up to her and mentioned to her that the song that she had just sung was beautiful. Sister, then went back into her classroom, took the manuscript out of the wastepaper basket, and taped it together. Sister states that the song "*I am the Bread of Life*," has had a life of its own ever since. The popularity of the hymn coincided with the use of vernacular language in the celebration of Mass. This song is not only popular in the Catholic Church but also in the Episcopal and Lutheran Churches.

Last Sunday in our Gospel reading we heard of Jesus feeding the five thousand with five barley loaves and a couple of fish. This Sunday in our Gospel reading we hear of Jesus stating that he is the bread of life. Next Sunday Jesus states in the Gospel reading, "I am the bread that came down from heaven." These three Gospel readings all come from chapter 6 of the Gospel of John. Last Sunday, this Sunday and next Sunday we are being reminded of the gift that is the source and summit of our Faith, the Eucharist.

In these three Sunday Gospel readings we focus on the Eucharist and the amazing gift that it is for us. It would be natural, as we focus on the Eucharist, to wonder why bread is used as the means for the host to bring our Lord to us in the miracle on the altar. Naturally, we can turn to Genesis 14:18 and see that Melchizedek the priest-king of Salem, who worshiped the one true God, brought out bread and wine and blessed Abram. But we can also turn to Genesis 3:3 and we hear of Eve informing the snake that the only fruit they cannot eat is from the tree in the middle of the garden, the tree of knowledge. We can also turn to Exodus 12:21 and hear about the Passover and that lamb is to be eaten. So, we could wonder why bread as the host and not an apple or a piece of lamb.

Bread is truly universal for the human race and dates back to at least 14,400 years ago, it is in many ways for humanity the staff of life. Bread is a staple for humanity, be it lavash for the Armenians, injera for the Ethiopians, the baguette for the French, scones for the British, and challah for the Polish. It seems that every society has come up with some type of bread staple that has helped to sustain the society through providing basic nourishment for the society as a whole. It was in the Black Desert region of northeast Jordan that Archaeologists discovered twenty-two fragments of what is considered bread and they have been able to date the campsite to 14,400 years ago.

Knowing that bread is universal to humanity and appears to be a staple in all societies it makes sense that Jesus this Sunday in our Gospel reading would declare that he is "*the bread of life*." It would also make sense that at the Last Supper Jesus uses bread for the host, for the miracle of the Eucharist that strengthens and nurtures us in our journey of faith. Jesus Christ is the universal staple that we need as an individual and as a community. Christ is the staff of life that transforms us from what we are to what we can become. In closing Sister Suzanne Toolan's song called "*I am the Bread of Life*" reminds us that Jesus the bread of life gives us what we need to be who God has created us to be, and at the end of our journey in this world Jesus will raise us up to the Heavenly Kingdom.