

When you go out to eat with friends, there's an assumption that everyone will order something different from the menu. But if you go to eat at someone's home, there's an assumption that everyone will eat the same thing. I guess at someone's home, to eat what that person prepared is to enter a kind of communion with everyone there. And I guess when we go out, eating different things is a sign of great abundance, the chef's ability to please a variety of tastes and to give personal service.

The miracle of the loaves somehow accomplished both these things. Everyone ate the same thing, which was a sign of communion. And the number of people there showed that Jesus could provide in great abundance, to serve many people just the food they needed.

This miracle story appears in all four gospels. Matthew and Mark each record two different occasions when this took place. No other miracle is so strongly verified by all the gospels. We hear John's version today for almost a silly reason. Throughout this Church year our gospels on Sundays come mainly from Mark. But Mark's is the shortest of the four, and he doesn't quite have enough stories to make it through the entire year. So the lectionary interrupts Mark's gospel at a point where he tells about this miracle, and puts John's version in its place because after this miracle, John provides the discourse Jesus gave on the bread of life, his primary teaching about the eucharist. So for five Sundays starting today the Church gives us gospels from John, and then we'll return to Mark.

This miracle foreshadows the eucharist. The eucharist is a source of our communion with one another, and Jesus provides it in abundance. This little food goes a long way to satisfy just what we need. As you know, the Catholic Church does not offer communion to every Christian who comes here. Other Churches let anyone receive, but we limit the sharing of communion to members of the Catholic Church because it is one sign of our unity in faith. Nor do we share communion with very young children because we believe people should understand more what they are receiving. And in certain cases some Catholics do not share communion because of some penalty, such as those married outside the Church or whose participation would cause some scandal to the community. The Catholic Church receives some criticism from other Christians because of this, especially in the light of a gospel like this where Jesus shares loaves and fish with absolutely everyone coming to hear him. But we are also trying to be faithful to Saint Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, where he says whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord. Examine yourselves, Paul says, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup (11:27-28).

After sharing the loaves, Jesus took special care to gather the fragments that were left over. And after we have shared communion, we need to take special care of what is left over – our goodness, our faith, and our desire to share the gospel with all who are not here, and invite them to take steps to the body of Christ.