

Laetare
John 6:1-15

Today we hear about Jesus miraculously feeding the 5,000. The fact that it shows up in all four Gospels tells you that it's important.

The feeding of the 5,000 certainly teaches you that our Lord promises to "give daily bread to everyone, even to all evil people." (SC) Jesus knew that some of the people He was feeding wanted only a bread king, yet He fed them anyway. Our Lord cares about everything that He created, which includes all people. Normally He provides through regular means like farmer, rancher, and producer. You even get to participate in God's care for people when you care for your children, neighbors, and those impoverished where you live. But Jesus doesn't use these regular means in today's feeding. He acts miraculously.

This miracle is certainly meant to point to the greater miracle of Jesus feeding His people through His body and blood. Later in John 6, He claims that He is the bread of life that comes down from heaven and that He will give His flesh for the life of the world. (John 6:35, 38, 41, 48, 50, 51) Jesus willingly gave up His life on the cross to pay for the sin of all people including yours and mine. There He won the victory over sin, death, and the devil. He distributes that victory freely in Holy Baptism, Absolution, Preaching, and His Holy Supper. The feeding of the 5,000 that fed empty bellies foreshadows the feeding through His Supper that feeds empty lives. As Jesus says, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you." (John 6:53) You receive this wonderful gift of life through faith, that is, when you believe that the forgiveness of sins Jesus offers in His Supper is *for you*.

But I believe this miracle teaches us something else as well. Jesus certainly saves you both body and soul. Listen to the creation of man.

“When no bush of the field was yet in the land and no small plant of the field had yet sprung up—for the Lord God had not caused it to rain on the land, and there was no man to work the ground, and a mist was going up from the land and was watering the whole face of the ground—then the Lord God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature.” (Genesis 2:5-7)

You know that Eve was formed from the rib of Adam. So, she was made of the same stuff as Adam. You know that you’re born from a father and a mother descended from Adam and Eve. And so, you too, are made of the same stuff. You’re made of the dust of the earth and share this in common with every other living creature God has made. You’re also made from the breath of God, which is unique only to man. You are body and spirit. And you are redeemed body and spirit.

We confess in the Apostle’s Creed that “I believe in... the resurrection of the body.” This means the body you currently have. This may horrify some of you. After all, your bodies bear the marks of sin. When God promised death as a result of sin, He didn’t mean an instantaneous death of the body. Sin over a lifetime culminates in an aged body that doesn’t work as it ought. As Jesus told Peter, “When you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go.” (John 21:18) You see this in nursing homes all around us. You will experience this yourself unless your Lord calls you home to Himself before old age.

As Paul puts it, you have a perishable seed which must be sown in death to be raised as an imperishable body. (1 Corinthians 15:42) But it is still your body. That’s why Christians are traditionally buried and not cremated. And they were traditionally buried in a graveyard attached to a church instead of a cemetery which can be located anywhere.

There, their bodies await the resurrection of the dead, when their imperishable body will be reunited with their soul waiting in heaven. Listen to one of the blessings a pastor says at the committal of a body in the grave:

May God the Father, who created this body; may God the Son, who by His blood redeemed this body; may God the Holy Spirit, who by Holy Baptism sanctified this body to be His temple, keep these remains to the day of the resurrection of all flesh. Amen.

This confesses the hope we have in the resurrection of the body and soul by our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, we typically bury the body in the ground. Unfortunately, the pagan practice of cremation has become popular, even among Christians. The Christian who is cremated is still resurrected bodily by our Lord Jesus Christ, but they confess a different worldview. The Greek and Eastern worldviews hold that the only real thing that matters is spirit and not the body. That's why they cremate. They ultimately don't care about the body. They have no hope of a bodily resurrection.

The church has constantly battled the heresy of Gnosticism. It appeared shortly after Jesus' resurrection and has plagued the church ever since. Gnosticism comes from Greek philosophy and holds that only the spirit is important and not the body. It can also manifest the idea that Jesus didn't come bodily. Saint John fights these ideas and warns us:

"By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already." (1 John 4:2-3)

The spirit of Gnosticism is antichrist, that is, against Christ who came bodily to save us body and spirit.

Now I am not aware that any of you are Gnostics, but you take on the spirit of Gnosticism when you despise your bodies. It usually sounds something like this, “spirit good, body bad,” or “spiritual things are great, but fleshly things are bad.” It’s where you think the only good things are so-called “spiritual” things like worship and prayer. It despises physical things like water combined with God’s Word or physically eating or drinking the Lord’s body and blood. In the Lord’s Supper, your Lord feeds you spiritually and physically for the forgiveness of your sins.

The spirit of Gnosticism may also manifest in abuse of your body with food or alcohol or lack of physical activity. The admonition of Paul to “discipline your body” is ignored. (1 Corinthians 9:27) This seems especially hard for us in America where the normal thing to do is gorge ourselves on all manner of rich food and drink every day. Now I am not saying you must be fit and look like a fitness model to be a Christian. But I am saying, you should take seriously the stewardship of your bodies. Eventually, your body will succumb to the punishment of death to await the resurrection where you will receive your new, but the same, glorified body!

This is also why we care for others in both body and soul. Adoption agencies, hospitals, and soup kitchens are the heritage of Christianity. In Roman culture at the time of Christ, it was common for Romans to leave their babies up to 1 year old out in the wild to die if they didn’t want them. Infanticide was not only legal but widely practiced. Christians were known as kidnappers because they would find these babies and raise them as their own. They loved these rejected babies because Jesus had created them and died for them. Hippocrates is known as the father of medicine, but Greek hospitals were only for free Greeks. In fact, only the really wealthy Greeks could afford them. Christians started hospitals to care for all people, both the destitute and the affluent because Jesus cares about both the affluent and the destitute. It was common in the early church for all members to bring bread and wine. Some would be set aside to be consecrated for the Lord’s Supper and the rest would be distributed to the poor after the

service. Christians care for the poor because our Lord died for all people including the poor. We care for others body and soul.

I hope that the Samaritan woman at the well has come to your mind during this sermon. Jesus told the Samaritan woman:

“The hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship Him. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.” (John 4:23-24)

It is true that you worship in spirit but worshiping in spirit does not mean abandoning your body. Paul says it this way, “present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.” (Romans 12:1)

It is also helpful to know that when Paul talks about the old man and the new man, he is not making a distinction between flesh and spirit. The old man is body and soul and so is the new man! Jesus redeems both your body and your soul!

Ever since His incarnation, Jesus is body and spirit. Jesus is body and spirit right now. That means that He is present both spiritually and bodily in His Supper. You don't ascend spiritually to heaven to partake of the Lord's Supper but the Lord descends to you here with His very own body even though you can't see it. When Jesus says, “This is my body,” He means what He says. You receive His body into your mouth to eat. Your Lord, who fed 5,000 with five barley loaves and two fish, feeds Christians all over the world with His actual body and blood for the forgiveness of their sins.

Today, may the Lord's Supper “strengthen you in both body and soul in faith toward God and in fervent love toward your neighbor.”

In Jesus' name. Amen.