

LAETARE / THE FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT

Text: Galatians 4:21-31; St. John 6:1-15

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, AND OF THE ✠ SON, AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

No slave willingly serves his or her master. A slave only serves his or her master outwardly, without honor, without respect, without love. For no man or woman can truly love one who keeps him or her in chains, no matter how sweet the promised reward for such service might be. Indeed, it is impossible to do so! A slave will always resent the master who owns him, who steals away his or her God-given right to freedom.

A son or daughter, on the other hand, can give what a slave cannot, what a slave would withhold—honor, respect, love. To be sure, a son or daughter must say, *“I am my father’s; to him, I belong,”* even as a slave must say, *“I am my master’s; to him, I belong,”* but a son or daughter may also say, *“My father is mine, he belongs to me,”* which is something impossible for a slave to claim of his or her master. Understanding this, it is easy to see that a son or daughter does not serve their father to gain their father’s favor, rather they serve because *they* are in favor. That is to say, they do not serve in order to *be loved*, rather they serve because they *are loved*, and being loved, they love in return.

For this reason, a Christian may truly look forward to the rewards of Heaven, but even these rewards are not a Christian’s primary motivation for service to God through love and service to one’s neighbor. No! What truly motivates a Christian to love and serve God with acts of service and love toward one’s neighbor is what *God has already accomplished* in the sending of His Son, JESUS, to die upon the Cross of Calvary in his or her place. To say it another way, it is not the promised rewards to come that motivate a Christian to love and serve God, but God’s love and the promise already fulfilled in CHRIST JESUS.

In this we Christians are no longer children of the Law, having cast out the slave. We are children of the free woman, the Church, which is the Bride of CHRIST, and therefore we are children of God who is our FATHER in Heaven. Thus, we Christians turn to God as children turn to their dear father for refreshment and renewal. For we were hungry, and He gave us His Body to eat. We were thirsty and He gave us His Blood to drink. Our LORD has blessed this Meal and its supply and benefits shall never be exhausted.

Saint Paul makes all of this abundantly clear in his epistle written to the Christian congregation in Galatia as he describes our covenant relationship to our God. As Paul lays it out, we are not to understand the word “*covenant*” as some sort of business deal or contract, for a deal or contract it is certainly not. Business deals and contracts are products of and governed by the law. A Christian’s covenant, “*our covenant,*” with God defines our “*relationship*” to God—a relationship of grace, love, and mercy.

Therefore, our covenant relationship with God is not something any one of us could bargain for as though we had something of value to exchange with God that we may gain for ourselves some form of future reward. No! Our covenant relationship with God defines *what God has made of us*, children of our Heavenly FATHER, made so through the Holy waters of Baptism in which we receive the benefit of our LORD’s innocent suffering and death, and this, not as slaves, but as children and heirs of God’s promise already fulfilled by CHRIST upon His Cross. In this covenant relationship, we are sustained with JESUS’ very Body and Blood, being fed with the self-same sacrifice which saves us, that we are strengthened until the Day of His return.

Thus, our LORD has come to save you and give to you, a child of God Most High, the Bread of Life, that you should eat of it and live forever. JESUS came to feed you, His people, with Bread that is never depleted and with Drink that never runs dry! Would that all who are weary and heavy laden recognized the Church as the place of refreshment in this wilderness of sin and suffering, despair and death. For our LORD, JESUS, came with compassion for all those who are weary, who are heavy laden, who labor under the weight of sin and the crosses they must endure in this life. He came for all who hunger and thirst for righteousness feeding them with the eternal Food of Immortality which is His Body and Blood given and shed for you.

This feeding is the only miracle we shall ever need. The multiplying of fish and loaves in the desert was, for our LORD, no great miracle. It was no great thing for the Creator of the grain to multiply the seed, not in the earth, but in His hands which bring life. It was no great thing for the Creator who filled the seas with life to multiply the fishes.

Such miracles are no greater than our LORD’s creating, sustaining, and preserving creation itself. In a sense, one could say the feeding of the 5000 is really no miracle at all; it is simply what God does because He is God. Therefore the “*birds of the air... neither sow nor reap... the lilies of the field neither toil nor spin*” and yet they are provided all things needed for this body and life by our good and gracious God.

This is the Food of which you are to eat and live, for even two hundred denarii worth of bread is not sufficient to save you. No, not all the bread in all the world could

save you. Instead, eat of the Food which forgives your iniquity, and receive from the LORD's hand double for all your sins.

In this life, we eat the bread of sorrow, pain, and suffering, of mourning and tears, but our LORD JESUS says, *"I am the Bread of Joy, the Bread of Life, the Bread of Peace. He who eats of this Bread will never hunger; he will never thirst. Come, look to Me and I will give you rest."* In our despair, having cried out, JESUS answers our cry with a Cup overflowing and a table prepared before our enemy who is Satan.

Our LORD is not stingy in His giving. The grace of God is greater than our need, so much so, that our poor human vessels cannot possibly contain it. He opens His hand and satisfies the desires of every living thing. Yet neither does He satisfy every craving of your sinful flesh. Our FATHER knows what is best and He provides abundantly according to what is good. Even as today's Gospel account relates, JESUS did not merely feed the five thousand enough bread to satisfy them, He gave them enough to fill their needs, and still, there were twelve baskets full of leftovers.

However, JESUS does not simply provide mere bread. For *"Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God."* That Word of God is the *"...the Bread of God...who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world."* The Word of God and the Bread of God are one and the same; they are JESUS who came down from Heaven to do the will of His FATHER.

What is His FATHER's will? JESUS, Himself tells us, *"This is the will of the FATHER who sent Me, that of all He has given Me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up at the last day. And 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."* The FATHER has given you to the SON to be raised up on the last day.

God's will is that you be saved from sin, death, Satan, and the grave; it is for this reason He sent His SON to save you. JESUS comes as the Living Bread from Heaven and anyone who eats this Bread will live forever. JESUS, Himself, tells us, *"Whoever eats My Flesh and drinks My Blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day."* Our LORD comes from the FATHER and gives Himself, His Body and Blood, to you.

Men cannot buy such Bread. Not 200 denarii, not even 30 pieces of silver, no amount of treasure could ever be enough. But our LORD JESUS provides it for free, here, at this very altar, where we witness a multiplication of God's grace, without equal and without price. In the Sacrament of the Altar, JESUS' promise to be with us is always made good.

Through Word and Sacrament, our LORD's desire to dwell in you is fulfilled. Through Word and Sacrament, His righteousness is bestowed. Through our LORD's Word and Sacrament, the sure mercies of His promises are given to strengthen and encourage your hurting soul, to lift you out of yourself, out of your worry, your doubt, your loneliness, your depression, your fear, and despair. You are loved and set free, no longer a slave, by the only Perfect Lover. Rejoice! For you are His even as He is yours, and He has declared to you, *"I forgive you all your sins."*

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, AND OF THE ✠ SON, AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

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