

Out of Our Corners

John 6: 56-69

Home Moravian Church, August 25, 2024

Is there anything so easy to eat as bread? No dishes required, not even a knife: If the loaf is unsliced, tear it with your hands. Whether dense and chewy or soft and airy, always somehow just right. Whether dark and complex like wheat bread or sweet-spicy like a lovefeast bun, always just what you need.

For the crowd of at least 5,000 fed by Jesus in the sixth chapter of John, eating the bread was easy; but after that, things got harder. Let's look at the rest of the story, as we've been following it through our Sunday Gospel readings.

The morning after the meal, the crowd got hungry again. Who knew? So they came back looking for Jesus in the place where he had given thanks and broken that bread; but they couldn't find him (*because he walked across the water*).

When they did find him, he challenged them. He said they were just looking for more food, and not for the presence of God. Then Jesus got metaphysical, which he does a lot in the gospel of John.

Metaphysics—Wikipedia definition—is “the branch of philosophy that examines the basic structure of reality.” I tried to take one philosophy class in college, and withdrew ignominiously just before the deadline, because after three weeks I had not understood enough to take even a single note. So I empathize with everyone who struggles with Jesus's teaching in John—starting with the crowd surrounding Jesus that day.

Fortunately, in the last 2000 years a lot of commentary has been made available; and so, were we standing today with the crowd in John, taking notes on Jesus's metaphysical discourses, we might recognize a few themes we could write in our notebook.

Theme One: *Believing*. "The work of God," says Jesus in verse 29, is "that you believe in him whom [God] has sent." Commentator Karoline Lewis says that the whole thrust of John's gospel is to make its readers into believers, and then to sustain us in our believing.¹ But for John, believing in Jesus Christ is not intellectual assent to doctrinal statements; believing is being in a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Commentator Gerard Sloyan says, "Belief [for John] is impossible apart from a close, personal relationship with the Son of Man who is in heaven." It's interesting to note that John never uses "belief" as a noun; it's always a verb, *believe, believing*, alive and ongoing.

Which brings us to theme two: *Abiding*. The word "abide" comes up over and over in John's gospel. Abiding, for John, is a way of being: not so much being in a place as being in a *person*. Again, it comes down to relationship—a relationship so intimate that each, in some way, lives within the body of the other, and draws on the life of the other. So deep is this relationship, Gerald Sloyan says, that there is only one model: the mutual indwelling of Jesus in God, and God in Jesus.² In the same way that Jesus says, in John 10, "the Father is in me and I am in the Father," in John 15 he urges his disciples to "Abide in me as I abide in you." To *believe* is to enter into a relationship in which we *abide* with Jesus, and he with us; and so we are all in God, and God is in us.

¹ Karoline Lewis *John*, in *Fortress Bible Preaching Commentaries* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014), 28.

² Gerard Sloyan, *John*, in *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1988), 73.

Theme three (are you still taking notes?): *Eternal life*. We hear it first in chapter 3: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” In Jesus Christ we have the promise of living forever in the presence of God. “What heaven means for this Gospel,” says Karoline Lewis, “is being in the presence of God. Heaven and earth are no longer locations but a truth about God’s character, that God’s presence is wherever the believer is.”³ The place, in other words, of mutual abiding.

Believing. Abiding. Eternal Life. All three of these themes, so common in John’s gospel, illuminate Jesus’ discourse on bread. Jesus, as the bread of life, gives us the food that sustains us in our work of believing, allows us to abide in Jesus, and gives us eternal life.

And all of this metaphysical complication, Jesus connects to a framework very simple and familiar to his audience: the story of how the Israelites, wandering through the wilderness, were fed for forty years by manna, a bread come down from heaven. Then Jesus pulls his listeners from the familiar into the unfamiliar, from a bread that kept the Israelites alive for a time, to a bread that one can eat and not die. A bread that is, somehow, *him*. “Whoever eats of *this* bread,” Jesus says, “will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”

Eating the bread was easy; but now the crowd finds Jesus’ teaching hard to swallow.

Do you know, in the Exodus story, what the Israelites did when God provided manna? The manna that would nourish them and save their lives? They *complained!* After awhile, they got tired of manna, and they started grumbling—or *murmuring*, as it says in many translations. Go back to Exodus sometime and read about the wilderness journey. It’s a *great* story, so revealing of *us*. You’ll recognize every struggling, hopeful, cranky human you ever knew and

³ Lewis, 91.

maybe even yourself. If you keep your eyes and heart open, you'll also recognize God. The God who is with Israel all along their journey; who provides for, who is present with, who *loves* these struggling people even as they huddle in their discontents—don't you think they huddled? Away from where Moses could hear them? That's why I prefer the word "murmuring." "Stop *murmuring* among yourselves," says Jesus. Murmuring is the complaining we do, not in shouts, but under our breath; not on the steps of City Hall, with a bullhorn, but in the parking lot after the meeting, quietly, in a huddle, so that the only people who hear you are the ones who agree with you.

At every turn, the sixth chapter of John connects us to the Exodus story about manna; and one connection that has surprised me, over the last few days that I've been rereading this chapter, is how Jesus' audience is repeatedly murmuring, just like the ancient Israelites. Three times in this one chapter, they respond to Jesus' teaching by huddling and complaining and disputing *among themselves*. (There's the corner!) "How can he say he 'came down from heaven'?" "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" And, *from his own disciples*: "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?" Maybe it's time to acknowledge defeat, close our blank notebooks, and withdraw from the class.

Whether it's because he's Jesus, or because they are not talking as quietly as they think, Jesus knows that people are complaining. He knows that his teaching is difficult. And he knows that when frightened people whisper in corners, those corners become echo chambers, amplifying their doubts and fears.

So he confronts the whisperers. Are they offended—scandalized—by his words about the bread of life? If that's the case, can they truly keep following? Not if they are unwilling to nourish themselves with Jesus' words, which are "spirit and life." Not if they cannot partake of

Jesus as the bread of life. Not if they are unable to step out of their corners and step boldly into larger relationship.

Jesus draws the crowd into a place of decision; and a lot of them decide to go home. Because he challenged them, says the text, “many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him.” We can imagine Jesus watching as, one by one, these would-be followers turn and walked away. When the crowd is finally gone, twelve remain. And “Jesus ask[s] the twelve, ‘Do you also wish to go away?’”

Peter answers Jesus’ question with a question: “Lord, to whom can we go?”

I love this non-answer: this moment when Peter, speaking for the twelve, confesses that if there is any other option, only Jesus knows it. It reminds me of the moment in the valley of dry bones when God asks Ezekiel, “Mortal, can these bones live?” and Ezekiel just surrenders the question back to God: “O Lord, *you know.*”

Lord, to whom can we go? It is the confession we make when we have tried every way we know to figure everything out for ourselves, and in the end have discovered that there is nowhere to go and no one to help but God. Bishop Sam Gray tells the story of a family member who, at an apparently impossible crossroads, offered up the truth that “you don’t know that God is all you need until God is all you have.”

That’s the moment when we have to just close the notebook and look around for Jesus. He is still holding out his hand. To whom can we go, after all, but to the one in whom we believe; in whom we abide; in whose words we find food and drink, spirit and life?

Yes, Jesus’ teaching is “difficult.” Not just hard like philosophy class, but demanding, requiring commitment, risk, and radical trust in the ongoing presence and provision of God.

And yet it all comes down to something as simple as bread: that easy-to-eat, always just right, always just-what-you-need nourishment that we have, any time we have it, only by the provision of God. Jesus' words about the bread of life are grounded firmly in the tradition of manna because that manna story grounds us in the human relationship with God: a relationship in which God is with God's people all along their journey; in which God provides for, and is present with, and will not abandon, and has an everlasting love for those people. It is a relationship of constant presence on God's part, and utter dependence on ours. Lord, to whom can we go? And to where can we go—where must we go—but out of our corners and into larger relationship with God and one another?

Jesus knows our needs. Jesus knows when we need bread to fill our stomachs, and when we need to hear more about the bread of life. Jesus knows when we need to be comforted, and when we need to be challenged in our faith. May we know our need for Jesus; and when Jesus calls us out of our corners, may we step forward with confidence in the Holy One of God.

Amen.