Diocese of New Jersey – Online Sermon

11 Pentecost – Proper 14 – Year B – August 8, 2021

I Kings 19:4-8; Ephesians 4:25 – 5:2; **John 6:35, 41-51**

Preacher: The Right Reverend William H. Stokes, *12th Bishop of New Jersey*

*Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.* John 6:35

Have you had your fill of bread yet?

As many of you are aware, every year in Lectionary Year B,[[1]](#endnote-1) we take a break from our reading of Mark’s Gospel and spend some time, five weeks actually, in the Fourth Gospel, the Gospel of John. All of this time is spent in chapter 6, the “Bread of Life” Discourse. We’re halfway through.

We began three weeks ago with John’s account of the feeding of the 5,000 (John 6:15), the only miracle that is included in all four gospels. That event is in the background for the rest of chapter 6, used as a place of departure for John’s Jesus to offer some teaching about himself and his identity including one of the characteristic “I am” sayings of John’s Gospel,  *I am the bread of life* (6:35). *.*

The “I am” sayings are noteworthy. It is pretty certain that the writer of the Fourth Gospel, the person we call John, intends his readers and listeners to connect these sayings with God’s self-identification to Moses in the Book of Exodus – “Tell them ‘I am’ has sent you,” says the voice of God to Moses from the Burning Bush (Exodus 3:14).

“I am the Bread of Life,” Jesus says in John 6. “I am the Light of the world,” he says in chapter 8:12. “I am the Gate”, or “the Door” in chapter 10:7. “I am the Good Shepherd,” also in chapter 10 (vs. 11). I am the Resurrection and the Life” in chapter 11:25. “I am the way, the truth and the life” in chapter 14:6 and “I am the true vine” in chapter 15:1. Jesus uses the phrase “I am” 45 times in John’s Gospel.[[2]](#endnote-2) It’s clearly no accident.

Chapter 6 of John, where we have spent the past few Sundays, and where we will spend two more builds on our understanding of Jesus as the Bread of Life. Again, it all began with Jesus feeding the 5,000 meeting the fundamental, literal hunger of a crowd by the Sea of Tiberias, or Galilee.

Last Sunday, in a pattern distinctive of John’s Gospel, Jesus engaged in conversation with a crowd, but he and they seemed to be talking on different levels, even talking past each other.[[3]](#endnote-3) The crowd interprets the things he says literally; Jesus tries to take them to a higher level.

More of the same seems to be happening today, but there are differences. Lutheran New Testament scholar Brian Peterson observes, “In last Sunday’s text, the center of attention was upon Jesus as the gift from the Father for the life of the world. Building on that claim, this Sunday’s text focuses on Jesus as the center of faith to which the Father draws people.”[[4]](#endnote-4)

Peterson continues, “The movements within chapter 6 for these two Sundays, and for the one that will follow, are certainly interconnected, but they are not identical. Jesus is not simply repeating himself, and John is not writing in circles.”[[5]](#endnote-5) That’s good to know.

Our reading begins by repeating chapter 6, verse 35 which we heard last week*. Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”* Hearing this again does give the impression that Jesus is repeating himself and, in truth, he will do that as the chapter proceeds. You might be inclined to “tune-out.” Don’t. There’s more to it.

John writes, *Then the Jews began to complain about him because he said, “I am the bread that came down from heaven.” They were saying, “Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, ‘I have come down from heaven’?”* (6:41-42).

As is often the case in John’s Gospel, Jesus’ listeners are operating on a different plane than he is. This crowd thinks they know his origins just because they know who his earthly mother and father are. But John understands where Jesus’ true origins are. *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God….And the Word became flesh and lived among us* (John 1:1,14)*.* Jesus’s origins are heavenly.[[6]](#endnote-6) Failure to grasp that, failure to believe it, means failure to grasp and understand him.

In response to the crowd’s grumbling, Jesus says something puzzling, paradoxical that some might find troubling. *“Do not complain among yourselves. No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me; and I will raise that person up on the last day*. *It is written in the prophets, ‘And they shall all be taught by God.’ Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me* (6:43 – 45). Is this about predestination? What about human free will?

In his commentary on John’s Gospel, D. Moody Smith observes, “John does not hesitate to state bold paradoxes….Jesus is God and a human being. One is invited to come to Jesus and believe, seemingly an act of human will…At the same time the initiative finally belongs to God…”[[7]](#endnote-7)

Smith continues, “Yet the assertion of the initiative of God, that is the priority of grace, is an important aspect of the consciousness of faith whether in early Christianity or ancient Judaism….It is also clear that John insists on the cruciality of human decision.”[[8]](#endnote-8) God reaches out toward us first in Christ; it is then up to us to respond.

In our reading, as he does in much of John’s Gospel, Jesus underscores his divine origins and marks the clear distinction between himself and the rest of humanity, even the rest of creation: *Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father* (6:46).

He challenges his listeners to make a decision, indicating to them what will result from the decisions made: *Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die* (6:47 – 50).

Roman Catholic scholars William Wright and Francis Martin believe that “Jesus identification of himself as bread from God develops biblical imagery for God’s wisdom and law, which were likened to food and drink. In this symbolism, to feed on God’s wisdom or Torah means to take it in, learn from it, and allow it to transform one’s life. Starting from this foundation, Jesus will lead his hearers to an altogether new level of meaning in which they are invited to feed on him as God’s gift. As the bread of life, Jesus is God’s wisdom who has come down from heaven and become flesh.”[[9]](#endnote-9)

It’s about eternal life…eternal life in him…Eternal life experienced now, not just after death, not in some far off future, and some far off place, but now, here today; life in the love and light of Jesus that does not feel the constraints of any time.

*“I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh”* (6:51).

Wright and Martin provide a rich insight, writing, “After teaching that God is now providing life-giving bread from heaven, Jesus identifies himself as this bread of life in whom God makes good on his promises of end-time salvation.”[[10]](#endnote-10)

Jesus said*, “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”* That bread is the fragrant offering which is offered to us and for us in our diseased world which is starving to be fed.

Let us pray:

Gracious Father, whose blessed Son Jesus Christ came down

from heaven to be the true bread which gives life to the world:

Evermore give us this bread, that he may live in us, and we in

him; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one

God, now and for ever. Amen[[11]](#endnote-11)

1. The Episcopal Church, along with many other denominations used the Revised Common Lectionary for its Sunday and Holy Day Lessons. Released in 1994, the RCL was a collaborative effort between the North American Consultation on Common Texts (CCT) and the International English Language Liturgical Consultation (ELLC). For the actual readings appointed, see <https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. See Felix Just, S.J. “The ‘I AM’ Sayings of Jesus” found at <https://catholic-resources.org/John/Themes-IAM.htm> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. See John 6:24-35 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Peterson, Brian “Commentary on John 6:35, 41-51 on the *Working Preacher* website for Sunday, August 9, 2009 found at <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-19-2/commentary-on-john-635-41-51-2> [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Peterson - *art.cit* [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. See Smith, Jr., D. Moody *Abingdon New Testament Commentary – John* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999). p 155 ff. Smith writes, “That Jesus is the Man from Heaven is the premise of Johannine Christology.” [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Smith, 156 [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Martin, Francis and Wright, IV, William M *Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture – The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2015) p. 124 [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Collect for the Fourth Sunday in Lent, Book of Common Prayer (1979), - New York: Church Publishing Inc. p. 219 [↑](#endnote-ref-11)