

## The Bread of Life

John 6:24-35

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I have a love/hate relationship with the gospel of John. Of the gospels, it's my favorite to read. It's beautiful, the language is powerful and striking and deeply theological. It gets me deep down and makes me furrow my brow and close my eyes and really ingest the words. But, sometimes when I'm reading it, the beauty is drowned out by confusion. Sometimes I wonder if the gospel writer was hard of hearing and missed a few lines of dialogue; or if he might have lost some of his notes, because things seem to be missing. My former teacher now Bishop Will Willimon has said of John's gospel, "It is a veritable symphony of incomprehension." The people in the story don't even get it themselves, so how do we expect to understand a couple thousand years and several translations later?

In the story we heard just a few minutes ago, the crowd following Jesus seems a little confused. They have witnessed the feeding of the 5000 and tried to make Jesus king. He's run away from them because they've missed the point – he's not *that* kind of messiah- and in his running he has shown the disciples his uncanny ability to walk on water. And then the crowds, who didn't see him leave with the disciples (and missed the walking-on-water bit) find him in Capernaum and ask, "Rabbi, when did you come here?"

Now, I've heard it said a million times that having the right answers is not nearly as important as asking the right questions. And in this regard, the crowd is woefully inadequate. I guess "When did you come here?" is an interesting enough question, since they didn't see him leave, but Jesus has been performing all kinds of miracles: healing, feeding, changing water into wine... so his itinerary and mode of transportation are probably not of the greatest importance when the crowd has a chance to converse with the greatest teacher of their time. Jesus seems unaffected by their question, but offers a response that almost sounds like a riddle: "Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on Him that God the Father has set his seal."

I'd love to see this part made into a movie – because at this point I think they'd zoom in on individual faces, which would probably show a combination of frustration and confusion and total cluelessness. They just asked, "When did you get here?" And Jesus responds with this whole mini-lecture about food that perishes and God the Father setting his seal. Jesus does this annoying, beautiful thing again and again in John's gospel - and I think he does it in our lives, too, in one way or another: we ask a simple enough question, and the answer we get is crazy complicated and far deeper than we wanted to go. The crowd was just saying, "Hey, Jesus, um, there was only one boat over there and we saw the disciples get in it and leave but you weren't with them and then later we went looking for you and you were gone and now you're here but there wasn't a boat over there for you to take, so how did you get here?" Simple enough. The truthful and most direct response would have been, "Well, friends, I walked on the sea until I met up with the disciples in the boat, and then I got in their boat and suddenly we arrived here at Capernaum. I can do that because I'm the Son of God."

But Jesus doesn't say that. In fact he doesn't tell the crowd when or how he got to Capernaum at all. Instead he says, "You think you're interested in my miracles – you think I'm intriguing because I've fed thousands with a few loaves and fish and had tons left over. But what's really motivating you is not your full belly – it's your warm heart. It's not the miracle of the feeding that's struck you with wonder: it's your being filled."

Now I don't know about you, but this would annoy me. This whole, "I know what you *really* want" bit, the whole, "You're missing the forest for the trees" thing. But it doesn't seem to phase the crowd, if they even notice. They just ask another semi-unrelated question: "What must we do to perform the works of God?" It's like they haven't heard Jesus' little speech at all, and they think, "Well, if he's not going to tell us when he got here, we'll just move to the next question on our list: "Number 2, Jesus, 'How do we perform the miracles, too? What's the secret?'" And again Jesus is unfazed: "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent." Then they start to catch on: "Okay," they say, "believe. We can do that, but give us a sign. You know, Moses did that whole manna in the wilderness thing where bread fell out of heaven – can you do that?" And here's where you start to realize they're *really* missing some things, since they *just* saw Jesus feed five thousand people with five loaves and two fish. So Jesus starts to break it down a little simpler for them: "Moses didn't give you the bread from heaven," he says. "My Father is giving you the bread from heaven *right now*. *I am it.*"

I can't imagine they totally grasped that, but the Bible doesn't tell us – the next thing that happens is that the religious people get mad because Jesus says he came out of heaven and they already know that Mary and Joseph are his mom and dad and that he came out of Nazareth, not heaven. But we don't have to go there, because our text ends with that most profound proclamation: "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." This is way better than what Moses gave, you see – because the manna that rained from heaven in the wilderness only lasted for that day. If the Israelites tried to save it up, it got maggots in it and rotted. But Jesus says, "Come to me, and that's it. You'll never be hungry again."

It strikes me that the lectionary – that three-year cycle of assigned scripture readings – gives us this story for Thanksgiving. Other years at Thanksgiving we read about the 10 lepers who Jesus healed, and only one came back to say "thank you." That's a pretty obvious choice, isn't it? Being thankful at Thanksgiving? Or other years we read the part of the Sermon on the Mount that tells us not to worry about what we'll eat or drink or wear because God will take care of us and give us everything we need. That sounds pretty good for Thanksgiving, too. But this year, this year we read about Jesus being the bread of life.

And I have to admit I read this text over and over and over again and thought, "What does this have to do with Thanksgiving?" I was going to preach about practicing gratitude as a way of life. And when I read *this* Scripture, I had all kinds of crazy things I was pulling out trying to make that connection, like how Jesus isn't where they expect him to be, and God doesn't always show up in *our* lives where we've planned and how we should be thankful for that because God knows better... And the irony is that I fell right in line with the stupid crowd: they were so wrapped up in the person they wanted Jesus to be, that they were missing what was right in front of them. And I was missing it, too.

You see, like most of you, I will gather with family on Thursday. We will laugh and share stories, perhaps avoid or wade through awkward conversations, eat turkey and dressing and green bean casserole and then sit around our warm, comfortable home watching football and dozing until time for a feast of pies. We will eat until we moan in discomfort. We will commit the sin of gluttony. We might tell a story about pilgrims arriving in America and sharing a meal with the Native Americans, which will be so romanticized that it doesn't even approach reality. We may go around the dinner table and ask each person to tell something they're thankful for, which is a pleasant and helpful practice, but then we'll go on our way to prepare for the madness that is Christmas shopping. We will focus on filling our bellies, and like the crowds that followed Jesus, we'll believe that that's what makes the day special.

But Jesus knows better. Jesus knows that's not really what we're looking for at all. We're really after the food that endures, the bread that abides with us and feeds our souls. We're looking for incarnation, which is when the stuff of this life is filled with the Spirit of God to make the ordinary extraordinary – something that's best seen in Jesus, who is God wrapped up in flesh.

You may not realize that today marks the last Sunday of the liturgical year. In Christian terms, we're basically at New Years Eve. Next Sunday is the first Sunday of Advent: the season of waiting for Jesus' birth is how we begin again. And so Thanksgiving is also the perfect time to look back at the blessings in our lives and to give thanks for them. The year is ending, and what a blessed year it has been, even with our sorrows and our struggles and our fears – what a year of blessing, when God has never left us and has offered us grace upon grace upon grace. And we *should* give thanks this week, for all of those blessings.

We also look forward to that most poignant season of waiting, when anticipation builds and builds until we are practically bursting and finally the Christ child is born anew in our midst. Thanksgiving is the transition between the old and the new, between the past and the future, between the end and the beginning again. **And here, in that in-between space, Jesus offers us himself.** Before we move on from the past, before we get so wrapped up in acquiring the latest material things and one-upping each other on gifts, Jesus offers us himself and he tells us that all of life is *gift*. Before we forget why we're here, Jesus asks us to take a moment to remember that **these holidays aren't about filling our bellies at all.**

I hope you will go around your table on Thursday before you eat your turkey and say out loud what you are thankful for. Remember the past year, remember your blessings, and vow to make thanksgiving a way of life. And then, as you sit around with your belly so full that you can barely stand yourself, or as you swim in loneliness without the loved ones you have longed for, **open your heart and let yourself be truly filled.** Remember all the amazing things that have happened in the past – your own manna from heaven – and acknowledge that what God offers you now and in the future is even greater. In the bread that is being offered to all of us again and again, **Jesus is not just looking to fill our bellies, but to feed our souls.** We may have come looking for a “sign,” but Christ offers the gift of life. And that is something to be thankful for. Amen.