

Sermon

Proper 14B August 11, 2024

John 6:35, 41-51

We are in the middle of the Bread of Life discourse, and things are starting to get difficult. Before today Jesus was the popular miracle worker who fed and healed people. But now, however, things get difficult when people start questioning his heritage, and they get difficult when Jesus says that those who eat of his flesh will live forever. I want to look at these two issues: the complaining people and the bread of life being Jesus' flesh.

We all know the Gospel of John is . . . different . . . from the other three gospels. It employs sharp contrasts such as light and dark, above and below, and spirit and flesh. Whereas the other gospels show Jesus as God's anointed who announces the coming kingdom, John clearly identifies Jesus as a part of the godhead from the beginning – the Word was with God, and the Word was God. It is John's understanding of who Jesus is that undergirds today's difficulties.

The first difficulty we have is with the people complaining about Jesus saying he is the bread that came down from heaven. In John, this complaining goes back to Exodus when the people complained against Moses and God. There they complained that they had no food to eat, and then they complained that all they had was manna. In today's gospel passage, the people complain that Jesus equates himself with bread from heaven and they complain that he's not from heaven, or God, but is Mary & Joe's kid whom they all know. For John, the people aren't complaining about Jesus because of some really odd metaphysical gobbledygook, they are complaining about God himself, just like how their ancestors complained to God.

The second difficulty we have is with Jesus saying that the bread of life is his flesh. It's no wonder people complained about this because it sounds an awful lot like cannibalism – eat my flesh, drink my blood. It does sound kind of weird. The problem is that, in John, Jesus is talking on a whole different level than the people are hearing. Like Nicodemus who tries to understand “born again” literally, the people aren't getting it.

In his comments about eternal life, Jesus isn't speaking of immortality or a heavenly future or some pie in the sky by and by. The food that endures for eternal life points to nourishment in the ongoing presence of God. One of the things Jesus does is to give us an example of what life in perfect unity with God looks like. One aspect of that is to live, act, and speak every moment knowing God is with you; to

live in such a way that God infuses your very being. That is eternal life because the eternal God is with us.

When we think about God, one of the properties that comes to mind is self-giving. God gave of himself when humans were created in God's image. He gave of himself when he created a place to live. He gave of himself when he provided manna in the desert. He gave of himself when he became incarnate in the person of Jesus Christ.

We also can be self-giving. We give of ourselves for our children, our lovers, and our spouses. Sometimes we give of ourselves for friends, or those in need. Later on in John Jesus will say, "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." Jesus, bread of heaven, gives his life, his flesh, through his death and resurrection, for the life of the world.

This is difficult for people to hear, and even more difficult for people to emulate. We generally want the easy way out. Give us this bread, always, and give it to us now.

But in receiving that bread from heaven we are asked to contemplate on Christ's sacrifice. We are asked to consume that bread so that we may live as Christ lived. We are asked to reflect the ongoing presence of God as an example to the world around us.

John is both different and difficult, and we can't always have neat, compact answers. I think John, more than any other Gospel, asks us to live into the mystery that is God. Part of living into that mystery means that we can never fully understand the immensity and infinity that is God. How often do we, like the Israelites in the desert or like those gathered around Jesus today, complain to or about God because we don't understand? How many times do we demand simple answers rather than put in the effort to explore the mystery?

May we not only live into the mystery of God, but may we also understand that the bread we eat here is infused with the presence of Christ, and it is this bread that was given for the life of the world. And then, as we consume the Body of Christ, may it so infuse our lives that we also reflect the mystery and the eternal life of God.

Amen.