

Sermon – The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

John 6: 35, 41-51

This is the second week of four weeks that the lectionary compilers have devoted to some 40 verses of the sixth chapter of the gospel according to John. It is not often in the lectionary that such time is dedicated to one part of one chapter of a gospel. When this happens, it means that the passages of scripture set aside for a series of Sundays has something special to say to us.

As you would remember from last week the setting for this particular event in Jesus' life is the day after Jesus has fed the five plus thousand. This took place on the eastern side of the Sea of Galilee. The crowd, as the people are referred to, are fed enough bread and fish so that they are "satisfied."

The next day they wake to find that the rabbi, the teacher called Jesus had disappeared. Little did they know that he had already gone to Capernaum on the western side of the sea of Galilee. So they went after him to find him. When they found him, Jesus began to teach once again, lessons that the so-called crowd would find difficult to understand.

In the early days of Jesus ministry, we know that he was a devout Jew and that people saw him as a rabbi, a teacher, someone who really understood the Torah and the prophetic writings. So it was natural for people to follow him, if only to hear his wisdom and interpretation of the ancient writings. But Jesus' teaching evolved. The 60th verse of this chapter records that the disciples thought that his teaching was "difficult" and hard to accept.

The reason Jesus' ministry of teaching evolved away from the traditional temple teaching was because his ministry evolved out of his true nature, being the incarnation of God, both fully human and fully divine. It has been difficult for many to understand exactly what that meant.

It was the patristic fathers of the 4th c that really wrestled with the concept that Jesus was the incarnation of God. After much debate the ecumenical councils of the 4th century settled the argument by acknowledging that Jesus was indeed unique in that he was fully divine and fully human. And Christians from then until now have ascribed to this understanding.

So Jesus was more than a teacher of scripture and Jewish law. Jesus evolved into a teacher with a new message, one that challenged the understanding of God that shape religious Jewish life. In religious life it was all about adhering strictly to the Torah, and to the rabbis' interpretation of the Torah and the prophetic writings. Following the rules and regulations was what mattered most and by doing so it was thought to please God.

So it was understandable that the crowd asked Jesus to tell them what they needed to do to perform the works of God. And if you remember Jesus' response where he said, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent."

Teaching in the oral tradition always necessitated the use of images as a way of conveying a particular concept or point. Jesus used images in his teaching a lot, especially in his use of parables. In these verses from John's account Jesus uses the image of bread. I think we can safely assume that everyone understood what bread was. It was the staple food of the population then as it is now. It was a food that relieved hunger when eaten.

Jesus taught the crowd that he was the bread of heaven and that the nourishment that he gave was not to relieve hunger per se, but to was to feed the essential spirit each of us carries in our beings.

The crowd struggled to understand what he was saying. It is here that that John suddenly starts to call the crowd, "The Jews", a label that has fueled anti-Semitism ever since. More precisely the term 'The Judeans' should be used for it was the religious of Judah that made up most of the crowd.

As Jesus ministry evolved, we see that it drove a wedge of sorts into the community. From that wedge emerged two groups. One group called "the followers of Jesus," his disciples, and the other group "the Jews."

The so-called Jews thought they knew Jesus. In v42 they say, "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know." It was common to equate knowledge of a person by knowing their parents, knowing their heritage. We might even do that today. So they had trouble understanding that Jesus might be more than just a rabbi, because he called himself, "the bread of Life," and "the bread that comes down from heaven." He was different.

Many people today struggle to understand that Jesus was more than just human, that he did contain the spirit of God, the divine within him, as unique as it was in his day. The prophet Isaiah had predicted that a messiah would come to save the chosen Jewish people from the corruption of the world. The messiah wasn't supposed to be the boy from the neighborhood. They were locked out of understanding by an inability to see beyond their knowledge. St Augustine said of this "they had weak jaws of the heart, they were deaf with open ears, and they saw yet stood blind."

Today, people similarly struggle to understand Jesus because to understand you must be open to learning about Jesus and to be patient as you come to know him over time. Despite all the evidence and the long tradition of the Judeo-Christian belief and traditions, people still struggle to understand how God came to earth in Jesus the Christ.

God in Jesus is the great disruptor. It is often through disrupting the prevailing norms that it becomes possible for people to see through to something that lies beyond. God saw that the world was being corrupted by misuse of power and through idolatry.

God saw the need to break into the world to arrest the further corruption of the people of God. It was Jesus who was to reveal to the world the exact nature of God and God's ultimate

purpose and desire for creation. It was therefore Jesus' role' to reveal God in the world in a new way.

The second half of this pericope focuses on how Jesus taught and the importance of his teaching about God. Jesus taught that it was God, the Father, who ultimately called people into relationship. It was God who taught the world, first through Moses and the prophets, then through Jesus and now through the Holy Spirit. Therefore, to come into a close relationship with God means that God has called that person into that relationship, God draws them in through the medium of Jesus or the Holy Spirit, both being the manifestation of God.

"As far as the manner of drawing goes," writes John Calvin, "it is not violent, so as to compel [us] by an external force; but yet it is an effectual movement of the Holy Spirit, turning [us] from being unwilling and reluctant into willing."

To be in close relation with Jesus means to be open to his teaching, to be willing to use it as a basis of life, and to use it as a basis of relating first to God, then to one another. To come into this relationship only requires an open and willing heart, a hunger if you like for understanding. Just as literal bread feeds our mortal bodies, the bread that is Jesus, feeds our spiritual souls and nourishes us so that we can truly live in hope and not fear.

When we believe in God, as revealed by Jesus, and come into a close and personal relationship with him, we come to know God. When we come to know God, we come to know what eternal life means this side of our own death. Jesus promises eternal life to those that come to believe in him. Eternal life is life now, not the life that comes after death. Life without God can be dark, fearful and hopeless. Life with God, as taught by Jesus, can be love and light, can be revelatory, can be fearless, and certainly is hope-filled.

When we eat of the bread that is Jesus Christ, we feed our souls and nurture our spirits. We continue down the road of becoming more like him, drawing our understanding of human relations from him, drawing our understanding of ethical behavior from him and shaping our lives based on helping those that are still lost find their way back to God just as he did. This is the one true relationship that is at the heart of what it means to be human and to truly live.

Jesus said to those in his midst, "the bread that I give for the life of the world is my flesh." Jesus would go on to disrupt the world to such an extent through his teaching, that the religious powers would feel threatened enough to plot his death. They could not let go of the understanding they had of God, yet God was standing right before them and they couldn't see or feel God's presence because they were closed off.

Jesus was then, and is now, all that we need to come into a deep and meaningful relationship with God, and that is all that God desires of us. When we come into that relationship we will exhale and learn a new way of life that will open like a beautiful flower in the spring. Life will no longer be empty.

Get to know Jesus as deeply as you can because Jesus is the essential bread of life, for in knowing him you will know God and in knowing God you will have a full life, a life God intended.

Amen