

“THE BREAD OF LIFE”

John 6:25-35

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Reading in this 6th chapter of John about the interactions between Jesus and some of the people attending his public events makes me think of conversations in a comical play. You know the kind of dialogue I’m talking about: one character’s comment is misheard or misunderstood by another, whose response, of course, is wacky and completely off base. Confusion and hilarity ensues.

I don’t know that there’s so much hilarity in John’s story, but there is certainly confusion. These folks who “find Jesus on the other side of the sea” had crossed the Sea (or Lake) of Galilee looking for him, because they were captivated by what they had seen of him just the day before. There was so much enthusiasm, in fact, that some people were declaring him to be a prophet. There was even talk of making him king, before he discretely removed himself from their midst.

Now they say, “when did you come here?” which seems an odd and rather irrelevant question – maybe they are just a wee bit offended that he slipped away from them the day before – but in any case Jesus doesn’t seem to think it’s a question worth bothering with. His answer seems to belong to a different question. He says to them, “You are just looking for me because you got plenty of bread to eat yesterday. But you need to be looking for more than just a meal for a day. You need the kind of nurture that sustains eternal life, which I will give you, because this is what God has sent me and commissioned me to do.”

Their response: “What do we have to do to do the works of God?”

Jesus feeds them with bread. He says he will give them spiritual nourishment and eternal life. He has not mentioned any preconditions or work requirements. And yet they want to know what they have to do. They haven’t really heard him. They’ve eaten the bread but missed the point.

Jesus tries to help them see: “The work of God is to believe in the One God sent.” No task list or multi-step program, just believe.

In response, they want to know what sign he will give them, so they can see it and have some evidence before they believe any of this. And that’s the point where I turn the page back to see if I’m remembering correctly. And in fact, yes, they were there, just the day before, when Jesus fed 5000 people (including, presumably, *these* people) with five barley loaves and two fish... and there were leftovers. If that’s not a sign, I don’t know what is. But it apparently wasn’t a big *enough* sign for these folks.

They couldn't see that the bread, enough to feed all those people, was the work of God – a sign of God's power and presence in their midst.
They couldn't see that wasn't, ultimately, about the bread.
They couldn't see the unconditional love and grace set before them.

But they seem to know they are hungry for something, and Jesus does, too.
Neither plentiful bread (or plentiful whatever) nor having stuff to do will satisfy our deepest hungers. Those deepest hungers are spiritual: for love, for forgiveness, for belonging, ... for God. Jesus tries to talk with them about that hunger, and how to satisfy it... but they are having an entirely different conversation.

They still seem to think that Jesus has some magical substance or formula or secret that will fill up their emptiness, make them happy, or reassure them of their place with God. "Give us that bread of heaven always," they demand.

But Jesus only gives them what he has been offering all along: himself. "I am the bread of life," he says.

"I am." *Εγώ εἰμι* in Greek. Those words are used 26 times in John's gospel. This gospel is all about who Jesus IS. Not so much about what he *does* or about the theological beliefs we have *about* Jesus, but about who he IS. "Believing" in this gospel is not an intellectual assent but a personal connection.

The people who are trailing after Jesus and looking to him for ... something ... to satisfy their hungers don't quite get this.

It's sort of like spending the afternoon in an art museum, taking notes on the painting titles, their subject matter, dates, styles, the artists and their influences, and so forth, without ever pausing to just gaze at the art, soak it up, notice details, or pay attention to the feelings it stirs.

Or like analyzing a meal in terms of ingredients, cost, nutrients and micronutrients, without smelling, tasting, or savoring its flavors.

It's the difference between knowing the details of someone's resume or life history, and knowing the *person*, between knowing some things about someone and having a *relationship* with them. A relationship is not comprised of the stuff another person can do for you or proofs of their worthiness or the things *you* have to do in order to deserve their affection. Life lived like that will always leave us unsatisfied.

What Jesus offers is not this blessing, that answer to prayer, a sign that we should do A rather than B, a ready forgiveness when we are struck by guilt, a moment of comfort or a spiritual "high" now and then. What Jesus offers us is LIFE... a whole life lived in relationship with him, surrounded by the grace of God, led by the Spirit, filled up with love enough to share.

I'm really struck by the bread metaphor Jesus uses for what he offers. Bread is the basic stuff of life, of every day. It's not an accident that Jesus doesn't say, "I am the cupcake of life." But don't we sometimes act as if he did? We act as if we don't really need Jesus. We run around doing all sorts of things to make ourselves and others and maybe even God believe that we are worthy. We are more comfortable with racking up volunteer hours than we are with grace. We like a warm religious feeling or a miracle now and then, but mostly we kind of hold back on faith; we're not sure there's really enough evidence. But we do get upset when God doesn't do what we think should be done. And a lot of the time we act as if Jesus is kind of an occasional treat rather than the bread of life; a nice extra element in our lives (when we can make time), rather than the loving presence whose grace sustains us for the living of every day and satisfies our deepest hunger in a way more lasting than a sweet treat.

Life is often hard. We have to deal with sorrow and pain and unwanted change and unexpected obstacles and unfairness and hurt and so much more. We have the experience of expectations we've had to let go, needs never quite met, unrealized dreams, disappointments, unanswered questions, doubts, fears, feelings of inadequacy. We struggle to find meaning in our days; we aren't sure why we are here or what we are supposed to do; we wonder why it feels like God is absent when we hurt. We long to be loved and known, even as we fear the inherent vulnerability. Sometimes we don't even know what we want, only that, as the U2 song goes "I still haven't found what I'm looking for."

We need something to feed our souls and sustain our lives for the long haul.

When we come to the table, we don't need to avoid the questions that reveal those hungers, those longings, the needs and empty places we so carefully hide. Because this is a place where all our needs are known and met with grace. Because Jesus who says "I am the Bread of life" is the one who invites us. When we come to the table, we don't need to bring anything but our hungry selves. And we are welcomed and fed. That's all there is to it. No complicated theologies are needed. No completed checklist of requirements. No proof of anything. No special attitude – come skeptical or joyful or tired or resisting, just come. And when you come, the bread is just bread. Nothing fancy. To remind you – to remind us all – that Jesus who invites us to this table isn't a dispenser of treats and favors and miracles but the giver and sustainer of LIFE. At this table, at every table, in every place, every day ... he offers us nothing less than himself. In relationship with him we find our deeper spiritual hungers are not quite so ravenous. In relationship with Jesus, we begin to learn how to accept the love and grace that satisfies the hunger in our souls, sustains us for the long haul, and gives us such an abundance of life that we can offer ourselves to others in the loving way of Jesus.

Resources:

John for Everyone, part 1 by Tom Wright

John (Interpretation Commentary) by Gerard Sloyan