

Discipleship in the Lectionary – 08/22/2021



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

Thirteenth Sunday After Pentecost

Revised Common Lectionary Year B

Sunday, August 22nd

John 6:56-69

Scripture quotations are from The ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

No easy believism here...

As the lectionary's five-week journey through John chapter six comes to an end, we reach the culmination of the Bread of Life discourse. The signs, the miraculous feeding, the Messianic fervor all lift the crowd's expectation of Jesus. However, once He begins to interpret what the crowds had just witnessed, Jesus' words become a stumbling block to many and even many disciples turn away. Building on the discourse of Jesus and Nicodemus in chapter 3, the Bread of Life discourse wraps up with a distinction between flesh and Spirit. Only those in the Spirit will continue walking on the path of eternal life. The fickle crowds disappear. In our time and place, just like across the Old and New Testaments, numbers and popularity rarely reflect the spiritual success of a ministry. Be aware of feel-good ministries. Be aware of easy believism requiring no repentance. Be aware of the smoke and mirrors. Be aware of orchestrated emotional experiences. What appeals to the flesh is no use.

John 6:56-69 Commentary

Following on from the miraculous feeding, the crowd begin to see Jesus as a prophet like Moses (6:14) and ask for a sign (v.30). It is the crowd who bring up the manna given to the Israelites in the wilderness (v.31). Jesus interprets the significance of the manna in what becomes the Bread of Life discourse (vv.32-58).

⁵⁶ Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him. ⁵⁷ As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever feeds on me, he also will live because of me. ⁵⁸ This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like the bread the fathers ate, and died. Whoever feeds on this bread will live forever." ⁵⁹ Jesus said these things in the synagogue, as he taught at Capernaum.

Following the earlier pattern during this five-week lectionary journey through the sixth chapter of John, the opening section of this week's text repeats the final three verses from last week.

The discourse ultimately leads to idea that feeding on Jesus' flesh (symbolism for believing) leads to mutual abiding (a theme common in John's Gospel). This theme is further explained in chapter 15 and modeled upon the mutual indwelling of the Father and the Son and is made possible through the Holy Spirit (14:15-20; 17:20-21). Jesus has life because of the Father. Anyone who believes in Jesus will have life. Jesus concludes by differentiating Himself from the bread (manna) their forefathers ate in the wilderness and still died. Anyone who feeds on Jesus, believes in Him, has eternal life and will be raised on the last day. Verse 59 reminds the reader of the location of this discourse. The crowd from the miraculous feeding came to Capernaum to find Jesus (v.24) and the Bread of Life discourse occurred in the synagogue.

⁶⁰ *When many of his disciples heard it, they said, "This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?"*

What began five weeks ago in the lectionary as a miraculous feeding of bread and fish has since been developed into a discourse on the Bread of Life. The Bread of Life is only attainable through eating Jesus' flesh and drinking His blood. This is synonymous with believing in Jesus and results in a mutual indwelling. Not surprisingly, for those having only the literal understanding, this teaching presents some difficulties. The disciples complain how what Jesus is proclaiming is a difficult message to hear and understand, perhaps even offensive. It is important to emphasize these are Jesus' disciples who are complaining, not the *Ioudai* (the Jews or the central Jewish religious authorities) who have already expressed objection to Jesus' statements earlier in the discourse. The reference to disciples here most likely refers to the broader group of disciples rather than only the twelve (clarified in vv.66-67).

⁶¹ *But Jesus, knowing in himself that his disciples were grumbling about this, said to them, "Do you take offense at this?"* ⁶² *Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before?*

If the disciples who grumbled about this teaching were offended now, how would they feel about His death on the cross before His ascension?

⁶³ *It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.* ⁶⁴ *But there are some of you who do not believe."* (For Jesus knew from the beginning who those were who did not believe, and who it was who would betray him.) ⁶⁵ *And he said, "This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father."*

Jesus reinforces how belief in Jesus and thus life in Jesus is only possible by the work of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit works through the Word. Human effort alone will never be enough (see Romans 7:14-25). There were some who did not believe, and Jesus knew their identity and the identity of the one who would betray Him from the beginning. Jesus reiterates what He said in v.44: "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day."

⁶⁶ *After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him.* ⁶⁷ *So Jesus said to the twelve, "Do you want to go away as well?"* ⁶⁸ *Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life,* ⁶⁹ *and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God."*

Verse 66 illustrates how many of Jesus' disciples turned back and no longer followed Jesus. What stands out in this verse is the use of disciples versus followers. Presumably these disciples had some level of commitment. The other point is that it was not just a few who turn back but many. Speaking now to the twelve, Jesus asks them if they also want to stop following Him. Peter responds with a confession like his confession of Jesus as the Christ in the synoptic Gospels (Matthew 16:16; Mark 8:29; Luke 9:20). Christ or Messiah means the anointed one of God. Here, Holy One of God similarly means one set apart by God.

Reflection

While the miraculous feeding was five weeks ago for us, it was just a matter of days ago for the crowds. The free all-you-can-eat bread and fish buffet had worn off. The crowds were hungry again. Even the lure of Jesus as the Prophet like Moses who could satisfy the needs of the crowds and rid the land of the Romans soon wore off against the perceived difficulty of Christ's teaching. Indeed, the pattern in chapter 6 is first the crowds have trouble, then it is the Jews (the Jewish leaders), then it is Jesus' own disciples. It is only the twelve, and specifically Peter, who confesses steadfastness belief and trust.

So, to recap, before the miraculous feeding Jesus was being followed by crowds because of the signs He performed with the sick. After the miraculous feeding people seek Him out with more fervor. They want to make Him a king. At this point the bases are loaded. He has their complete attention. Then He begins to interpret the sign of the miraculous feeding only to have people leave Him in droves. Part of it is due to his technique. He responds to objections with an escalation to a point where people are literally disgusted and offended. The text provides a clear explanation as to why: the Spirit gives life whereas the flesh is no help at all. In other words, human understanding and human motivation do not matter. Only the Spirit can cause belief. This section of text builds on the earlier dialogue with Nicodemus which had a similar juxtaposition of Spirit and flesh. Jesus told Nicodemus *“That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit”* (3:6) and how one must be born again of the Spirit (3:7). Jesus’ words are Spirit and life. Belief is the way to eternal life but only those who God draws to Jesus will believe (v.44).

As Christ died on the cross, He ended up with only eleven Apostles and most of them were in hiding. Despite all the crowds drawn by the miracles and signs, the sermons and teaching, the distance covered in His itinerant ministry, and the triumphal entry into Jerusalem, at the end of Jesus’ earthly ministry He was left with a community of about 120 disciples hiding in fear behind the locked doors of the upper room in Jerusalem (Acts 1:15). By human standards, this is not exactly a resounding success! Yet these 120 people born in the Holy Spirit on the first Christian Pentecost were all that were needed to ignite a fire that is still burning to this day all around the world.

It is rather ironic how the person who is the Good News went out of His way to demonstrate the worldly cost of believing in such Good News. Yet many in the church today with the responsibility to continue proclaiming and living out the Good News in our time tend to discount the earthly cost. If Christ made no apologies for the Gospel, why should we? There will always be crowds attracted to the signs, false or otherwise. There will always be crowds attracted to an uplifting, easy to hear worldly messages. When the message starts becoming tough to hear and difficult to understand, this is where discipleship begins. This is where the Spirit kicks in and we continue to struggle forward in the walk. To paraphrase Peter, *“Who else shall we follow? Christ has the words of eternal life and we have come to believe.”*

