

Discipleship in the Lectionary – 08/11/2024



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

Twelfth Sunday After Pentecost

Revised Common Lectionary Year B

Sunday, August 11th

John 6:35, 41-51

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Word...Flesh...Bread...Life

This is the third week in a row the Gospel lection is in the sixth chapter of John involving a conversation between Jesus and the crowds about bread. At the end of last week's text, Jesus revealed Himself as the Bread of Life (v.35) and this is where this week's lection begins. The rest of the text unpacks the meaning of Jesus' first great "I am" statement and presents us with a life choice we must not choose to ignore.

John 6:35, 41-51 Commentary

³⁵ *Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst."*

This verse appeared in last week's lectionary and is the first of the seven great "I AM" statements in John's Gospel (35, 48, 51; 8:12; 10:7, 9; 10:11, 14; 11:25; 14:6; 15:1, 5). This is the language of divine revelation. In Exodus 3, God desires to send Moses to Pharaoh to bring His people out of Egypt.

Then Moses said to God, "If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." And he said, "Say this to the people of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.'" (Exodus 3:13-14)

Jesus is the "I AM" and this is a revelation of His divinity. This is the place the current lectionary text begins.

⁴¹ *So the Jews grumbled about him, because he said, "I am the bread that came down from heaven."*

⁴² *They said, "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How does he now say, 'I have come down from heaven'?"*

There is a subtle shift in the audience from "the crowds" (presumably made up of mostly Galileans) to "the Jews" (*Ioudaios*) - a term common in John which, rather than an ethnic term, is often used to represent the religious leaders in Jerusalem who were hostile to Jesus. Technically speaking, *Ioudaios* directly translates as "Judeans." There is an interesting dynamic between the center of Jewish authority (Judea/Jerusalem) and Galilee as a theological backwater yet a place of tremendous importance to Jesus' ministry. The Jews grumble about Jesus. The same Greek word for grumble (*gongyzō*) is found in the Greek translation of the Old Testament (the Septuagint) when the Israelites complained against Moses for God's apparent lack of provision in the wilderness

(e.g., Exodus 16:2). They also question Jesus' claim that He is from heaven. The people must have remembered the day that Joseph and Mary first arrived in the area.

⁴³ Jesus answered them, "Do not grumble among yourselves. 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. ⁴⁵ It is written in the Prophets, 'And they will all be taught by God.' Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me— ⁴⁶ not that anyone has seen the Father except he who is from God; he has seen the Father.

Jesus responds by silencing the grumblers. Jesus then explains why He is not dejected by their grumbling: nobody can come to Jesus unless the Father first calls them. The word used here is "draw," the same word used for drawing nets. This gives a sense of the mechanics involved in being called. We must be dragged and hauled into faith by God. The human perspective here is that all may come to Jesus and believe (v.47). The divine perspective here is that only those drawn by God will believe (v.44).

⁴⁷ Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes has eternal life. ⁴⁸ I am the bread of life. ⁴⁹ Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. ⁵⁰ This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. ⁵¹ I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."

For those who do believe will be raised up on the last day (v.44). This is when eternal life is consummated. Jesus illustrates the difference between Himself and the manna in the wilderness. While manna was bread from heaven, it was not the true bread of life since the ancestors of the Jews ate such bread and yet died. Jesus is the true bread of heaven. Eating this bread will result in everlasting life. The bread of life is further clarified – this bread is Christ's flesh. This alludes to the death of Christ on the cross. The living bread of life that came down from heaven must first die to become the bread of life.

Reflection and Application

Chapter six opened with a miraculous feeding – a free lunch for thousands of people. The focus on Jesus shifted from being the intermediary of free bread from heaven like Moses to being the provider of a bread that brings eternal life. The bread of life that came down from heaven must first die to become the bread of life. The bread of life is thus the body and blood of Jesus. The bread of eternal life thus has a tremendous cost associated with it – something that was paid on our behalf.

This is only the second time in this Gospel that Jesus is referred to as the son of Joseph (1:45 being the other). The privileged class (the *Ioudais* or Jewish leaders seeing Judah as the locus of power) were so sure of Jesus' earthly identity and his social status. How could such a provincial hick from Galilee be what and who He is claiming to be? The crowds in the earlier part of the chapter missed the signs because they were only focused on their material needs. The elite missed the signs because they failed to align with their assumptions – which indirectly ties to their worldly needs of maintaining power and status. The intelligentsia or the "wise" missed the Messiah of God.

Typically, in human endeavors, new paradigms are often suppressed by the dominant players in the established paradigm for as long as possible. Eventually a paradigm shift occurs, and the new paradigm now becomes the new established paradigm until one day another new paradigm will threaten. With all the social change intensified by the pandemic, the already weakened established paradigm of the church is coming under increasing pressure. What alternative paradigms of church that exist at the fringe may potentially replace the established paradigm that most of us have grown up with? Christ's body in the world is always relevant in the world thus the expression of church changes over time. Are we prepared for change or are we stuck in the old paradigm?

This text also raises an uncomfortable question. If Jesus is the bread of life – why are so many Christians still spiritually hungry?

One possibility is that many have not been eating the real bread. Our culture is full of bread-substitutes. Thinking along the lines of Marie Antoinette and the quote that is perhaps falsely attributed to her, we have been eating cake for far too long. Our spiritual longings are being masked by our desires for the luxurious. We have lost our taste for bread. As Christians, we are being persecuted by our liberties and comforts, yet the irony is that no matter how many worldly comforts we pursue, we remain spiritually unfulfilled. Another false bread we pursue is “bread” as in “dough” or money. We seek prosperity at the expense of an abundant spiritual life. There are false, heretical gospels today that argue Jesus wants to make you worldly rich.

Another possibility is that we have failed to ingest the Bread of Life. Do we just taste the Bread or fully ingest it? Do we eat our fill of this Bread until we can no longer eat any more? Do we eat this Bread every day? If Jesus is the New Manna, then we remember how the Israelites in the wilderness could only collect a day’s worth of manna at a time. The manna could not be stored. We must seek Jesus, the Bread of Life, every day to satisfy our spiritual hunger. We must commit to being a disciple rather than a seeker. Easy believism and being spiritually fed do not co-exist! Jesus cannot be a life coach and the Bread of Life at the same time! Which Jesus are you following?

How do we seek the Bread of Life every day? The prologue of John tells us the following:

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us...” (1:1,14).

If we must eat the flesh of the Bread of Life every day, then we must devour His Word each day. We must make a spiritual discipline of being in the Word daily, whether that be devotional reading, following a specific reading plan, *lectio divina*, or formal study. Our relationship with the Word does not stop there. We must adopt the Word as our primary worldview. This means we look at our world through the lens of Scripture rather than look at Scripture through the lens of the world. This makes life rather simple. We interpret our world from the truth of Scripture rather than trying to keep up with what the world considers to be the truth for today. This is fully adopting the Word and living “all in” as a disciple.

Devouring as much of the Bread Life each day as you can is one diet where you do not have to count the calories.

