

From Bread to *The Bread*

John 6:35, 41-51

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*Suppose, then, we were wanderers in a strange country, ... and we determined to return home. We find, however, that we must make use of some mode of conveyance, either by land or water, in order to reach our home where our enjoyment is to commence. But the beauty of the country, and the very pleasure of the motion, charm our hearts, and turning these things which, we ought to use into objects of enjoyment, we become unwilling to hasten the end of our journey. ... Such is a picture of our condition in this life of mortality. We have wandered far from God...*

-(St. Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, chapter 4).

Recently Dr. Eric and I made a visit together to see a patient of his who is also a church member of ours. He came by the house to pick me up in his Rivian SUV. I was excited to get to ride in this electric car and he became excited showing it to me. We share an interest in cars and electric cars are especially interesting.

Our purpose was to make a pastoral and doctor visit. Our means was this electric SUV. It occurred to both of us that it is easy to get distracted from our purpose when the means becomes too enjoyable in and of itself.

The irony, and I think that both of us believe that it was divine irony, is just before Dr. Eric picked me up, I was reading St. Augustine who, about 17 centuries before, was writing about getting things that should be “used” mixed up with what

should be “enjoyed.” Augustine used the analogy of wandering far from home so that we end up in a land that is hostile or unpleasant, and we decide to return home. Of course, we take some sort of conveyance by land or by sea. We get into trouble, Augustine said, when we enjoy the mode of transportation so much that we forget that our goal is to get home, or we decide we want to just keep traveling and don’t care about home, or maybe we reach our destination and can’t enjoy being home because all we can talk about is how great the car was. You get the idea. For Augustine, we have all wandered far from God so let us not become distracted on our journey returning to our true home in Christ (see Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, I. 1-5).

Let me reassure that I got permission from Dr. Eric to tell this story and let me doubly reassure you that we both remembered why we were making our visit and did not confuse the means of our trip with the purpose of our trip.

I bring all this up because our Scripture reading today is from John 6 and among other things, the disciples and the crowds are confused about “means” and “ends.” They enjoy what is supposed to be used and use what is meant to enjoyed.

John 6 is all about bread – the feeding of the 5,000 and Jesus saying, “I am the bread of life.” Chapter 6 of John is packed full of preachable material, and the lectionary spends 5 Sundays on it. Since I’ve been out and we’ve had various guest preachers, and summer-ending services, we missed out on John 6 but today I want to touch on it, as we prepare to be fed by Word and Table.

The chapter begins with John’s version of the story of the feeding of the 5,000. He says that a large crowd kept following Jesus because they saw the “signs” he was doing for the sick. “Signs” are a big deal with John. A sign is not about itself but instead it points to something else. A “Stop” sign is not about the

visual artistry and red color of an octagonal object on top of a pole at a traffic intersection. The “Stop” sign is communicating something beyond itself, namely “Stop! And look before pulling out into that intersection.”

Likewise, for John, healing of the sick, or in this case in chapter 6, feeding the 5,000 is about more than everyone getting some bread to eat. It is a sign pointing to something beyond itself. As we read on, we discover that Jesus providing bread in the wilderness is not simply about a miraculous meal, as wonderful as that is. It is more about who Jesus is. He is the Bread of Life. John is telling us to move from bread to *The Bread*, from getting our bellies filled to recognizing the Living God, the “I am” is among them. Which is exactly what the crowd is having a hard time doing.

Which brings me back to my reading Augustine the other day. He said there are things we use, which last for a limited time, and things we enjoy, which last forever. The things we use are a means to an end, like a car taking us to visit someone. Properly, human beings are to be enjoyed. That is, they are an end in and of themselves. We don’t “use” human beings. To “use” a person is to abuse them. Instead, we rejoice in them for their own sake. We find joy in each other. We enjoy. Furthermore, Augustine says that the highest enjoyment is worshiping the Living God.

It is why the old Presbyterian Westminster Confession of Faith Catechism’s (1646) first question is, “What is the chief end of man?” With the answer being, “Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.” (Please allow me to update you, that is also the chief end of women and children.)

To enjoy God forever means relishing, cherishing, celebrating, appreciating, abiding in, participating with, being thankful for, and allowing the Living God in Jesus Christ to fill us, wash over us, and direct all our living.

What happens in John 6 is that the crowds follow Jesus because he provides bread for them. Back in verse 15, John says Jesus realizes the crowd was going to try to make him king, so he slipped away from them to go up on the mountain by himself. They are “using” Jesus instead of “enjoying” him. To use philosophical language, they are instrumentalizing Jesus. He becomes the means to their greater goal of being fed. Or their greater goal of political power when they try to make him king.

Can anyone think of an instance when someone might instrumentalize Jesus so they can have political power?!

When we use Jesus, use God for some other purpose, that’s called idolatry! And the end result of idolatry is the same it always has been – spiritual and moral death!

At the same time, we might use Jesus in ways that seem moral, and spiritual, and godly. I remember Jane had a student once, a good student who was most serious and devout in his Christian faith, but who also was stunned to realize that Jesus was more than the means to get saved. For this devout young man, everything was about getting saved and leading others to get saved, which was why Jesus died on the cross. To spend time with the Living Christ, to immerse himself in his life, and seek to become like him in the community of others doing the same, was something he had never imagined. This devout and deeply sincere young man was using Jesus for the enjoyment of getting to heaven, rather than understanding Christ is to be enjoyed for his own sake.

It is important to notice that here in John 6, Jesus introduces the first of his “I am” statements. Those two words are the most important words in John’s gospel and seven times Jesus uses “I am” with different metaphors to say something about who he is. “I am the bread of life” (John 6:35), “I am the light of the world” (8:12), “I am the gate” (10:7), “I am the good shepherd” (10:11, 14), “I am the resurrection and the life” (11:25), “I am the way and the truth and the life” (14:6), and “I am the true vine” (15:1).

Remember that “I am” is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word for the name of God (as in Exodus 3 when Moses meets God in the burning bush), usually spelled, *Yhwh*, and pronounced Yahweh or Jehovah as the old King James translated it, although it’s so holy that Jews don’t pronounce it at all, often substituting the word Elohim or Lord. John is telling us that Jesus is not simply the bread deliverer but is the Living God embodied and incarnated right here, now.

Jesus says, “I am... I am the Bread of Life ... I am the Living Bread who comes to you to give you life,” and by our participation, our abiding, our enjoying this Living Bread we have life ourselves (vv. 48-51).

The tragedy is that most everyone in John 6 don’t get who Jesus is. Indeed, throughout John it is interesting who gets it and who doesn’t. Right off at the beginning of John we are told, “He was in the world, and the world came into being through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him” (1:10-11). The theme of non-recognition and rejection is a thread that runs through the gospel of John.

Here and a while back, I read an article about movie screenwriting that said that in recent decades that the most overworked cliché in movies is “You just don’t get it, do you?” Dr. Evil says it in an Austin Powers movie. Martin Lawrence

delivers the line in *Big Momma's House*. We hear it on the lips of Stanley Tucci in *The Devil Wears Prada*, and Marisa Tomei in *My Cousin Vinny*. I could go on, but the list is long.

According to the article, when someone in a movie says to someone else, “You don’t just get it, do you?”, it’s always either the beginning of an argument or the end of a relationship. I think it is interesting that although perhaps Jesus thinks it, he never says it. Jesus is not interested in starting an argument or ending a relationship.

What he is interested in, with every person and group he encounters in the Gospel of John, is starting a conversation that might lead to the beginning of a relationship.

He just wants us to get it. And enjoy him forever.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.