

You Don't Have to be a Saint
A Sermon on John 6:48-60 by the Rev. Philip Major
St. Paul's ~ Syracuse, NY ~ August 15, 2021

If you were paying close attention during worship last Sunday, you may have noticed that the themes of our Gospel reading today are similar to what we encountered last Sunday. In fact, we have been reading portions of the sixth chapter of the Gospel of John four weeks in a row, and we will read one more portion next Sunday. Splitting a single chapter into five sections, read over the course of five weeks, doesn't help us understand what is being said. Like the disciples, at the end of this passage a few of us are saying, *"This teaching is difficult, who can accept it?"*

My favorite commentator on the Gospel of John observes that, for the author of the Gospel of John "to see rightly is to believe." When we understand what Jesus is saying we move ourselves closer to him. When we understand what Jesus is saying we are in a place of what we sometimes call 'believing', or abiding with God. So my purpose today is to help you understand the meaning of John 6.

In order to understand the message of today's passage, know that chapter six is a single, cohesive unit that was not intended to be broken up into short passages. Chapter six has layers upon layers of stories and ideas that only make sense in relationship to one another.

Chapter six begins with the miracle story we heard on July 25th. Jesus travels across the sea of Galilee and is followed by a very large crowd, more than five thousand people. Jesus distributes two fish and five loaves of bread and feeds the entire crowd of people. At the end of the story Jesus realizes the crowd is going to take him by force to make him king, so he slips away, up into the mountains by himself.

The twelve disciples left that place in a boat. A strong wind came up and the disciples rowed through the night. Then they saw Jesus, walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and the disciples were terrified.

The next day Jesus went to the synagogue in Capernaum. People who were fed in the crowd of five thousand were looking for Jesus and found him there, in the synagogue. The rest of chapter six tells about Jesus' conversations with the crowd of people in the synagogue. During the first conversation the people say, "Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness." They are referring to the Exodus story, where the people eat the manna when there is nothing else to eat. This makes sense, because all of the characters in the story are Jewish, and the Exodus story is the fundamental story for Jews, just as the Easter story is the fundamental story for Christians.

Jesus responds by going deeper into the idea of bread. There are two kinds of sustenance, two kinds of bread, as it were. We need food that sustains our physical bodies. We also need food that sustains us spiritually. Jesus argues that the bread we really need will sustain us spiritually.

As the conversation continues, Jesus says, for the first time, "I am the bread of life." Jesus offers food that sustains us throughout the age. Then some in the crowd began to complain about what Jesus said. The word can be translated 'complain' or 'grumble' or 'quarrel'. This is once again referring back to the story of the Exodus, where the children of Israel complained and grumbled in the wilderness. A few verses later Jesus will make the point that the children of Israel complained and grumbled in the wilderness and ate the manna, and eventually they died.

Before proceeding with today's passage, let's look back at the first part of the chapter and draw some conclusions. First, Jesus shows God's concern to feed people with what they need for physical sustenance. Second, Jesus brings God's power to the task of caring for people in need. Third, people have a tendency to grumble and complain and quarrel, and it never helps anything. Fourth, even though bread and food are essential, we also need something that nourishes us in a deeper way than bread.

This is where today's reading begins. Jesus says, *"I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."* *The Judeans therefore quarreled with one another saying, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?"*

Some of the people in the crowd are quarreling about the same kinds of things people quarrel about today. They are taking Jesus' words literally. That is why they ask, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?"

But when Jesus says, "I am the bread of life" he is talking about feeding people spiritually. You can tell this is what Jesus means, because later, in chapter eight he will say, "I am the light of the world." Jesus is not talking about being a physical light for the world, but a spiritual light for the world. In chapter ten Jesus will say, "I am the gate for the sheep." In chapter fifteen Jesus will say, "I am the true vine." In chapter fourteen Jesus will say, "I am the way, the truth and the life."

So when Jesus says, "I am the bread of life" and "The bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh" he is not speaking literally. Jesus is not a plant. Jesus is not a candle that would be so big and bright it could illuminate the world. Jesus is not a physical, wooden gate. Jesus is not a loaf of bread.

The point of all this is not to confuse people, or to make them argue. The point is that Jesus offers us what we need. The point is that sometimes we cling too strongly to things we have decided are certain. The point is that we have to be willing to let go of traditional or literal interpretations in order to understand God's way of doing things.

In the Gospel of John and the other gospels Jesus is given many titles and describes himself in many different ways. The point is that Jesus is not easily described or understood. Just as we cannot fully understand or describe God or God's ways, we will not be able to fully understand or describe Jesus.

Consider the entire chapter for a minute. It begins with the feeding of the five thousand. Here, near the end we hear Jesus saying, "I am the bread of life." Jesus is concerned with feeding people with actual physical bread, made from flour and yeast. Jesus is also concerned with feeding people with spiritual food that will sustain them throughout the ages. For Jesus, physical needs and spiritual needs are never far apart.

Consider the new twist on the phrase Jesus offered in today's passage: "The bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh." This isn't about cannibalism. This is about Jesus being directly concerned for us, for you and me and all of the little people all over the earth. Jesus says, "I give myself for you. We are connected." This is a theme that will come up increasing in the later chapters, in chapter 13 and chapter 15 and 16. Jesus calls us 'friends'.

Finally, consider that all of this is about an interactive relationship. Near the end of our passage Jesus says, "Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me." The point of this is that there is continuous interactivity between God, Jesus and us. God sends us what we need. Jesus gives real, physical presence to God's love for the world. In order to participate in God's life, we also must take initiative. God is active in our lives. We have the possibility of being active in God's life.

Thank you for being patient while I dive into the details of this chapter of the Gospel of John; you can probably tell John's Gospel sustains me, year after year. But I offer one more way, one simpler way, to understand what Jesus is talking about when he says, "I am the bread of life. All those who come to me shall never be hungry."

In order to understand I want you to bring to your mind someone who was sustained by the bread of life Jesus offers us. Perhaps this person was like a saint for you. Your saint was not perfect. But there was something powerful in their life. There was something that sustained them, through thick and thin times. There was a deep love, a deep hope they carried with them. You could see it in their actions and sometimes in their words, almost every day.

What was it that sustained this person? For me, when I consider the saints in my life, the answer is clear. They were sustained by this thing Jesus is describing as 'the bread of life'. There was a love and a hope in the center of their life that would never end. This is what Jesus is talking about.

You don't have to be a saint. All you need is to not cling too tightly to so called 'certainties'. All you need is to be willing to go a bit deeper, behind the literal meanings of the words. All you need is to respond to the love God has given to you.