

## The Bread of Life

<sup>24</sup> When the crowd saw that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they themselves got into boats and came to Capernaum looking for Jesus. <sup>25</sup> And when they found him across the sea they said to him, “Rabbi, when did you get here?” <sup>26</sup> Jesus answered them and said, “Amen, amen, I say to you, you are looking for me not because you saw signs but because you ate the loaves and were filled. <sup>27</sup> Do not work for food that perishes but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For on him the Father, God, has set his seal.” <sup>28</sup> So they said to him, “What can we do to accomplish the works of God?” <sup>29</sup> Jesus answered and said to them, “This is the work of God, that you believe in the one he sent.” <sup>30</sup> So they said to him, “What sign can you do, that we may see and believe in you? What can you do?” <sup>31</sup> Our ancestors ate manna in the desert, as it is written: ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’” <sup>32</sup> So Jesus said to them, “Amen, amen, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave the bread from heaven; my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. <sup>33</sup> For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” <sup>34</sup> So they said to him, “Sir, give us this bread always.” <sup>35</sup> Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me will never hunger, and whoever believes in me will never thirst. (John 6:24-35)



18th Sunday of Ordinary Time

*The Feeding of the Five Thousand* by William Hole  
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## Context

John 6 marks the beginning of a new section in the Fourth Gospel narrative. In 2:1-5:47 there was a cycle that included the revelation of Jesus’ glory and the rejection of that glory. These chapters contain miracles and discourses by Jesus that point to the authority of Jesus’ words and works—the wine miracle at Cana (2:1–11); the cleansing of the Temple (2:13–22); two healing miracles (4:46–54; 5:1–9); Jesus’ conversations with Nicodemus (3:1–21) and the Samaritan woman (4:4–42)—and so fulfill his promise to his disciples that they would see “greater things” (1:50). Yet this cycle also contains the first story of Jesus’ conflict with the Jewish authorities (5:9–47), a conflict that includes

the decision to kill Jesus (5:18). This first cycle establishes the themes and tensions that characterize Jesus' public ministry in John—from the manifestation of Jesus' glory (2:1–11) to the rejection of that glory (5:9–47).

The second cycle of Jesus' public ministry in the Gospel of John follows the same pattern as the first—it begins with a miracle in Galilee, the feeding of the five thousand (6:1–15), and concludes with hostility to Jesus and renewed intention to kill him (10:31–39). The difference between the two cycles is that the urgency of that question is highlighted as the hostility to Jesus increases. There are no new theological themes introduced, instead the same themes are replayed in a new context: Jesus' authority and relationship to God, Jesus' ability to give life and judge, the consequences of faith or unbelief. [O'Day, 519] And, as you might imagine, the antagonism in response to Jesus' words and deeds only grows. The second cycle poses the same basic question as the first: Will people receive the revelation of God in Jesus?

This and the following three Sundays our gospel is taken from John 6. So, perhaps it is best to see what lies ahead. John 6 follows the same basic pattern noted in chapter 5: miracle / dialogue / discourse. This pattern is more intricate in John 6 because the chapter narrates Jesus' self-revelation to two groups: the crowd and his disciples. As such John 6 contains two miracles: one performed before the crowd and the disciples (6:1–15) and one performed in front of the disciples alone (6:16–21). This dual focus is reflected in the discourse material as well. John 6 can be outlined as follows:

Verses	Sunday	Content
6:1–15	17 <sup>th</sup>	Miracle of feeding the 5,000 (with crowd and disciples)
6:16–21		Miracle (with disciples alone) – miracle at sea <i>cf.</i> Mark 4:34 <i>ff.</i> Jesus walks on the water
6:22–24		Transition
6:25–34	18 <sup>th</sup>	Dialogue (crowd)
6:35–59	19 <sup>th</sup> / 20 <sup>th</sup>	Discourse (crowd and disciples)
6:60–71	21 <sup>st</sup>	Conclusion (disciples alone)

**Walking on the water.** In 6:16–24, Jesus walks on the water. It is striking that John's sequence — the loaves miracle followed by that on the Sea of Galilee — is identical to that of Mark 6:34–51 and Matthew 14:13–33. In all three accounts Jesus calms his disciples with the identical majestic phrase: "It is I. Do not be afraid" (John 6:20; Mark 6:50; Matt 14:27). This phrasing, which in the Greek has no predicate, simply reads *egō eimi* = I am. The phrase has strong overtones of divinity, echoing the name for Yahweh found in Isa 43:10, 13, 25. Jesus is the divine presence; the disciples need have no fear.

There is a question as to why the water miracle should be situated at this point in a chapter that otherwise speaks exclusively of bread. What is it a sign of? No answer is completely satisfactory, but the following have been offered. Flanagan [990-91] offers: "(a) The Old Testament Passover miracles were manna bread plus the crossing of the Reed Sea, and water springing from the rock. Exod 14–16 ties together in tight sequence the account of the Reed Sea crossing and the gift of the desert manna. This traditional Exodus coupling of water and bread, found also in Ps 78:13–25, may have encouraged the first Jewish Christians to attach the Christian water-sign to that of the bread. They are so found in Mark 6, Matt 14, and now in John 6. (b) John is simply extending his theme of life-giving word by presenting Jesus as life-giver in times of famine and of storm. (c) The storm scene is intended as a sign of Jesus' divine status (the "It is I" of verse 19 masks the profound I AM of the original Greek) and his ever-helping presence, "do not be afraid" (v. 20)."

**A Transition.** <sup>22</sup> *The next day, the crowd that remained across the sea saw that there had been only one boat there, and that Jesus had not gone along with his disciples in the boat, but only his disciples had left.* <sup>23</sup> *Other boats came from Tiberias near the place where they had eaten the bread when the Lord gave thanks.* <sup>24</sup> *When the crowd saw that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they themselves got into boats and came to Capernaum looking for Jesus.*

**...and a final note...** What the Lectionary will divide up across four consecutive Sundays, most Scripture scholars see as a unified section: 6:25-71. This lengthy section can be outlined as follows:

- 6:25–34 Dialogue between Jesus and crowd (*our Gospel this week*)
- 6:35–42 Jesus' first discourse and "the Jews'" response
- 6:43–52 Jesus' second discourse and "the Jews'" response
- 6:53–59 Jesus' third discourse
- 6:60–71 Dialogue between Jesus and disciples

It will be important to see the movement between dialogues as we move from Sunday to Sunday.

## Commentary

### Why Are You Looking?

<sup>24</sup> *When the crowd saw that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they themselves got into boats and came to Capernaum looking for Jesus.* <sup>25</sup> *And when they found him across the sea they said to him, "Rabbi, when did you get here?"* <sup>26</sup> *Jesus answered them and said, "Amen, amen, I say to you, you are looking for me not because you saw signs but because you ate the loaves and were filled."*

The implication of the narrative is the crowd who finally caught up with Jesus in Capernaum could not have known about the miraculous events (vv.16-21) of the evening nor would they have had an opportunity to react to the *ego emini* statement – to even ponder, "Who is this that calms the sea." Their last encounter with Jesus was at the miraculous feeding of the 5,000 and their desire then was to take Jesus by force and make him king. It is at this point Jesus withdrew from them as the people wanted to remake the Messiah in their own conception. Jesus would not allow that; perhaps Jesus does not want to be found by the crowd "*looking for Jesus.*"

The verb "looking" is the present tense of *zeteo*. It is not a complex word; it basically means "to seek." Is seeking Jesus a good or bad thing? Previously they sought to make him king. Most often when *zeteo* is used in John, it refers to the Jews seeking to kill (or arrest) Jesus: 5:18; 7:1, 11, 19, 20, 25, 30; 8:37, 40; 10:39; 11:8. Perhaps that makes too much of the simple verb; perhaps not. In any case, the crowd finds him. They address Jesus as "rabbi"; this same crowd that previously had called him prophet (v.14) and wanted to give him the title "king" in v.15. In this context, "rabbi" is certainly less significant; it is the same title given to John the Baptist (3:26). It is a title of respect, but not a confession of faith.

Their question: "*When did you get here?*" should be taken as a simple question, but one wonders about that. This is the same crowd that has already sought to control Jesus and make him king. Might not the question be a bit more ominous? As Stroffregen wonders, might it also be a question of control: "We want to know exactly what happened."

Jesus does not answer the crowd's question but instead redirects the conversation to the crowd's motive in seeking him (v. 26). This is not the first group of people to see Jesus perform a sign and they are not the first group of people to be invited to see where, to whom the sign pointed. Jesus' use of the noun "sign" (*sēmeion*) invites comparison with the two Cana signs (2:1–11; 4:46–54). The disciples

saw the transformation of water into wine as a sign of Jesus' glory; the royal official saw the healing of his son as a sign of Jesus' ability to give life, and as a result they all believed in Jesus (2:11; 4:53). This crowd, Jesus says, hasn't looked past the fullness of their stomach. It would be too much to give them credit for looking at least as far as Jesus being a great prophet like Moses – that conversation peeks in only with later reference to “bread from heaven.” At this point the people only respond to the miracle in terms of their full stomachs; they do not see it as a sign pointing to something greater.

### For What Are You Working?

<sup>27</sup> *Do not work for food that perishes but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For on him the Father, God, has set his seal.* <sup>28</sup> *So they said to him, “What can we do to accomplish the works of God?”* <sup>29</sup> *Jesus answered and said to them, “This is the work of God, that you believe in the one he sent.”*

A modern reader might be more prone to take the beginning part of v.27 for exactly what it implies: don't work; it will be given to you – the implication being, given as a gift – and more than that the given (Jesus) has been ordained/sealed for this purpose. But then the one who is hearing these words receive them in a different context. These are working people for whom there is family and tradition – these are gifts – everything else is earned. The crowd gives “work” (*ergazomai*) a new meaning. Jesus' admonition about laboring to *receive* a gift of imperishable food is transformed by the crowd into a question about their *performance* of works. The grace in Jesus' words disappears.

The NAB translates v.28 as “*What can we do...*” The word *poiomen* is translated in other modern translations (e.g. NSRV) as “*What must we do...*” which seems more consistent with the Greek. It is not a question of capability, but rather, more in the sense. “OK, so maybe we understand that it is a gift. But what's the catch? What must we do to get this gift.” The verb is in a form that denotes continuity and regularity, as in “What must we continue you do?” This would fit in with the pattern of their lives in several ways.

Food was a perishable item. One must work for food everyday because food “did not keep” - one must earn a daily wage and daily acquire the needed foodstuffs and ingredients to prepare the daily meals. Jesus reminds them of the transient and temporal nature of such *food that perishes*. (v.27). This expression has been used before with Jesus' earlier admonition about the leftover bread fragments (v.12); “perish” and “be lost” translate the same Greek verb, *apollymi*. This same word will later describe the perishable manna of Exod 16:18–21.

How would they have understood *food that endures for eternal life*? (v.27) There are rabbinic passages and thoughts that understand such food as symbolizing the Torah, the Law. The Jews may have taken Jesus' words about the food that abides to eternal life as meaning the Law. What, then, does Jesus think they must do by way of works of the Law? The expression *works of God* (v.28 – note the plural) is most likely taken in this context – works pleasing to God – works expressed in the Law. For a faithful Jew it is understood that salvation would be found in the Law. It would not be a leap to then think salvation is the result of their own effort, their compliance with what God has already made clear, rather than a gift given in the person of the one upon whom God has set his seal.

Jesus replaces their “*works of God*” with the singular “*This is the work of God, that you believe in the one he sent.*” There is one thing needed: faith, trust in the person of Jesus. If they are looking for what they must do, then Jesus has answered their question. Will they make the move from “performance” to giftedness?

## The Challenge.

<sup>30</sup> So they said to him, “What sign can you do, that we may see and believe in you? What can you do?”

<sup>31</sup> Our ancestors ate manna in the desert, as it is written: ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’”

Throughout vv. 27–31, Jesus and the crowd use the same words but with very different meanings, another instance of the Johannine literary technique of misunderstanding. The crowd’s questions in v. 30 repeat key words from vv. 26–29: “sign” (*sēmeion*, v. 26), “do” (*poieō*, v. 28), “see” (*eidete*, v. 26, *idōmen*, v. 30), “believe” (*pisteuō*, v. 29), “work” (*ergazomai*, vv. 27–28). They shift the burden of who is to work from themselves (vv. 27–29) to Jesus (v. 30). The crowd’s questions imply a contingency: They will do God’s work only if Jesus does God’s work first and performs a sign.

Jesus has already performed signs and it the most public of ways. The cleansing of the Temple was a startling act (2:18). It had its implications not only for the condemnation of the Temple traders, but also for the Person of Jesus. It was a messianic action. The Jews demanded that Jesus authenticate his implied claim by producing a “sign.” Interestingly they did not dispute the rightness of his action. They were not so much defending the Temple traffic as questioning Jesus’ implied status. Their demand arose from the facts that the Jews were a very practical race and that they expected God to perform mighty miracles when the messianic age dawned

This section of the discourse is to be understood against the background of a Jewish expectation that, when the Messiah came, he would renew the miracle of the manna from the Exodus experience (see Note on v.31). What better sign could there be than a permanent supply of bread? Nonetheless, the crowd’s request for a sign from Jesus is jarring. How can they make such a request immediately after the feeding miracle in which they shared (6:14, 26)? Jesus’ words in v.26 are confirmed: The crowd does not recognize the sign that has already been enacted before them. The crowd fleshes out its demands in v.31 by appealing to their ancestors’ experience in the wilderness. Their appeal is couched in the language of Scripture, although it is not an exact citation of any one text (cf. Ps 78:24; Exod 16:4, 15). The fact that the crowd, like their ancestors, has already been fed with miraculous bread underscores the irony of their demand.

## Comes Down from Heaven

<sup>32</sup> So Jesus said to them, “Amen, amen, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave the bread from heaven; my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. <sup>33</sup> For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” <sup>34</sup> So they said to him, “Sir, give us this bread always.” <sup>35</sup> Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me will never hunger, and whoever believes in me will never thirst.

At vv.12 and 27 (gathering the fragments after feeding the crowd and referencing perishable food), Jesus implicitly linked the feeding miracle with the manna story of Exodus 16. In v.32, he does so explicitly. For the second time in this chapter Jesus prefaces his remarks with the solemn, *Amen, amen, I say to you*. Jesus reworks four essential elements of v. 31:

- (1) the donor of the bread is God (“my Father”), not Moses;
- (2) the gift of bread occurs in the present (“gives”), not the past;
- (3) the bread of which Jesus speaks is the “true bread from heaven”; and
- (4) Jesus tells the crowd that they, not their ancestors, are the recipients of God’s gift of the true bread from heaven (“gives you”).

Jesus answers the crowd’s demand for a sign (v.30) by showing them that they have already received one. The contrasting gifts of v. 32, the exodus gift of manna and the present gift of the “*true bread from heaven*,” recall the contrasting gifts of John 1:17: “*because while the law was given through Moses, grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.*”

Jesus describes the “*bread of God*” with two predicates: “*comes down from heaven*” and “*gives life to the world*.” These two predicates repeat what has already been said about Jesus in the Fourth Gospel. In 3:13, for example, the language of descent from heaven describes the activity of the Son of Man (cf. 3:31). In 5:21, Jesus is spoken of as the one who gives life (cf. 5:25–26). The description of the bread of God thus enables the Gospel reader (but not the crowd) to recognize that Jesus is the real subject of the conversation, not the feeding miracle alone. The conversation of 6:25–34, like that with Nicodemus (John 3) and the Samaritan women at the well (John 4), operates on two levels of meaning simultaneously and contains two understandings of the bread that comes down from heaven and gives life.

The crowd’s request for bread in this verse reveals that they understand only one level of the conversation. The similarity between the crowd’s request for bread (*Sir, give us this bread always*) and the Samaritan woman’s request for water in 4:15 is unmistakable (*The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this water, so that I may not be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water”*). She wanted the water in order to be relieved of the task of drawing from the well. They had been fed from the loaves and they probably wanted some permanent gift of this kind.

Like the Samaritan woman, the crowd of John 6 has understood one part of Jesus’ words—that the bread of which he speaks is better than the bread given to their ancestors—but does not grasp why it is better. The bread of which Jesus speaks is not given “*always*,” but is given once and for all in the very person of Jesus. And in receiving the gift, the recipient will never again hunger or thirst.

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## NOTES

**6:25 *Rabbi*.** This was the term that Nicodemus used (John 3:2) when he came as the spokesman of those in Jerusalem who were impressed by Jesus’ signs (2:3) ***When did you get here***. Literally “When have you been here” – a question that is a cross between “When did you get here” and “How long have you been here.”

**6:27 *food that perishes* (*apollumenēn*).** This may be an echo of v.12 where the fragments were collected so that nothing might be wasted (*apollumi*) – a word also appearing in John 3:16, 10:28 and 18:9. It may also well contain a reference to the manna collected in the desert that “perished” daily. This echo becomes clear in (v.32).

***work...for the food that endures for eternal life*.** Not in the sense of the effort of human endeavor alone, but in the sense of striving after, yearning.

***on him the Father, God, has set his seal*.** In Jn 3:33 we read that by accepting Jesus’ testimony the believer has certified (lit. “set his seal upon”) that God is truthful. Here God sets His seal (*sphragizo*) upon the Son, not so much by way of approval, but more by way of consecration (*hagiazo*, Jn 10:36)

**6:28 *to accomplish the works of God*...** Literally “work the works of God.” There is a subtle shift in the meaning of “work” from v.27 to v.28. In v.27 the people are told not to work in the form of “work for” food produced by human hands. In v.28 “to devote oneself to” provides a good parallel to the rabbinic tradition of “working on” or “devoting oneself” to the Torah.

**6:29 *This is the work of God, that you believe in the one he sent*.** The people’s response has focused on works they can do. Jesus puts the emphasis on faith

**6:31 *manna*.** Ex 16:14 describes manna as “fine flakes like hoarfrost on the ground.” The etymology of the word is from the folk Hebrew *man hū’* or “what is it?”

***as it is written, “He gave them bread from heaven to eat.”*** There is no exact OT quotation which matches the words. However, it seems the St John has taken a loose, by-memory combination of

several possible Old Testament quotations:

- Exod 16:4: “I will now rain down bread from heaven for you”;
- Neh 9:15: “Food from heaven you gave them in their hunger”;
- Ps 78:24: “He rained manna upon them for food and gave them heavenly bread”;
- Ps 105:40: “... and with bread from heaven he satisfied them.”
- Wisdom 16:20: “you nourished your people with food of angels and furnished them bread from heaven, ready to hand, untoiled-for”

All or some of these associated texts have been combined by into the one amalgam of verse 31

**[Messianic expectations:** In the text it is asserted that the people expected the Messiah to again bring heavenly bread. This is seen in non-scriptural texts and in rabbinic commentary. “It shall come to pass ... that the treasury of manna shall again descend from on high, and they will eat of it in those years” (2 Bar. 29:8). Similarly in the Sibylline Oracles we read of those who inherit life in the new age “feasting on sweet bread from the starry heaven” (Frag. 3:49). A midrash expresses the idea in terms of Moses: “As the former redeemer (i.e. Moses) caused manna to descend, as it is stated, Behold, I will cause to rain bread from heaven for you (Ex. XVI,4), so will the latter Redeemer cause manna to descend, as it is stated, May he be as a rich cornfield in the land (Ps. LXXII,16)” ]

**6:32 true bread from heaven.** The contrast between manna as physical nourishment and the power of God is not a new idea presented here. Moses (Dt 8:3) tells the people that even during the Exodus they did not really understand the meaning of manna. Yes it physically nourished them, but more than that it pointed to the Word of God as the true source of eternal life (*cf.* Wis 16:20, Neh 9:20)

**6:33 For the bread of God is that (he) which comes down from heaven.** The Greek *ho katabainōn ek tou ouranou* could mean “that which comes down from heaven” and refer to the Torah, or “he that comes down from heaven” and refer to Jesus. It is possible that the ambiguity is intended in that the people have to chose the good of Moses and the Law or the best of God which is Jesus.

**6:34 always.** The Greek *pantote* carries connotation of on-going, repetitive, and continual.

**6:35 I am the bread of life.** Another of the Johannine *egō eimi* expressions. This bread has been spoken of as coming down from heaven; thus when Jesus expresses the divine *egō eimi*, one hears an echo of Jn 3:13 wherein the Son of Man is the only one who has come down from the Father.

**comes to me...believes in me.** There is a parallelism her (and Jn 7:37-38) that echo Sirach 24:21, “He who eats of me [Wisdom] will hunger still; he who drinks of me will thirst for more.” Sirach means that people will never have too much Wisdom and will always desire more; Jesus’ words are such that people will never hunger or thirst for anything other than Jesus’ own revelation.

**will not hunger...will never thirst.** The use of the Greek *pōpote* is a subtle correction to the people’s response of always (*pantote*) having bread. This shifts the emphasis to the never-failing gift of Jesus as expressed in the double negative *ōu me... pōpote*,

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