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I am the Bread of Life

⁴¹ The Jews murmured about him because he said, “I am the bread that came down from heaven,” ⁴² and they said, “Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph? Do we not know his father and mother? Then how can he say, ‘I have come down from heaven?’” ⁴³ Jesus answered and said to them, “Stop murmuring among yourselves. ⁴⁴ No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draw him, and I will raise him on the last day. ⁴⁵ It is written in the prophets: ‘They shall all be taught by God.’ Everyone who listens to my Father and learns from him comes to me. ⁴⁶ Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father. ⁴⁷ Amen, amen, I say to you, whoever believes has eternal life. ⁴⁸ I am the bread of life. ⁴⁹ Your ancestors ate the manna in the desert, but they died; ⁵⁰ this is the bread that comes down from heaven so that one may eat it and not die. ⁵¹ I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world.” (John 6:41-51)

Context

For five Sundays here in the middle of Year B, our gospel is taken from John 6. So, perhaps it is best to see where this reading fits in. 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 th	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 th	Dialogue (crowd)
6:35–59	19 th / 20 th	Discourse (crowd and disciples); <i>vv.36-42 not read</i>
6:60–71	21 st	Conclusion (disciples alone)

The sacred author intended that John 6 be read as a whole, but given then exigencies of Sunday celebrations the continuity might well suffer unless we are attentive to the on-going message and dialogue in what has come before. It will be important to see the movement between dialogues as we move from Sunday to Sunday. To that end, let me provide an overview of the coming weeks of Sunday gospels.

The best way to understand, in a sense, is that the whole discourse begins on one verse, “*He gave them bread from heaven to eat*” (v. 31) – what follows from that verse forward is a teasing out of the deeper meaning of all that happens from the miracle feeding of the 5,000 to the conclusion. It is good to remember that John has a different intention than the other gospel writers. While they have recorded the event, it is John who seeks to explain the event through dialogue and discourse. It is also good to remember that John frequently has dual layers of meaning that are woven in the dialogues with people – e.g., Nicodemus and the Samaritan Woman at the well – and the dialogue is marked by misunderstanding. In Nicodemus’ case as the dialogue continues the misunderstanding only grows. But not so with the woman at the well. Each exchange leads to a deeper understanding of who Jesus truly is. Consider how she refers to Jesus as “man,” “Jew,” “rabbi,” “prophet,” and finally “messiah.” Expect to find those same features in this dialogue: Jesus will increasingly reveal more and listeners will increasingly understand and come closer to Jesus or will increasingly misunderstand and walk away.

Many scholars cite the work of Peder Borgen whose extensive work on this chapter makes a good case that this shows many of the features of a Jewish *midrash* which follows a phrase-by-phrase order on the following key phrases: *He gave; bread from heaven; to eat.*

- *He gave* (vv.26–34). In this first section, the emphasis lies on the giving. Jesus will give (vv.27, 34), not as Moses gave (v.32) a perishable manna food of mortality, but as the Father, source of eternal life, gives (v.32). Thus far, Jesus appears as the giver of bread and therefore as the new and superior Moses.
- *Bread from heaven* (vv.35–47). The insistence now shifts to the bread from heaven that Jesus not only gives but actually is (vv.35, 38, 41, 42). It is important to note here that the operative verb is “believe.” Jesus as bread from heaven is accepted and consumed through the belief required in verses 35, 36, 40, 47. What this means is that this is a faith nourishment. Jesus is bread from heaven, feeding all believers, in the same sense that Old Testament wisdom nourished all who accepted it (Prov 9:1–5). We might call this type of feeding “sapiential.”
- *To eat* (vv.48–59). In this final section, the vocabulary changes radically. The significant words are “flesh,” “blood,” “eat,” “drink.” Note the constant repetition of “eat” in verses 49, 50, 51, 52, 53, 54, 58. “Feed on” (an even more physical verb in the Greek than “eat”) occurs in v.57. These verbs become overwhelmingly insistent, as does the constant reference to flesh and blood, food and drink. The meaning of the discourse has changed. Where in the preceding section Jesus nourished through wisdom-revelation those who believed, the verb “believe” has now completely disappeared and is replaced by “eat,” “feed on.” Our homilist is clearly speaking now of *sacramental* nourishment, of the food and drink that one eats and feeds upon, of the Eucharistic nourishment provided by the flesh and blood of the Son of Man (v.53). The “Son of Man”

phraseology tells us that this is not the physical flesh and blood of the earthly Jesus and that we are asked to eat and drink but the spiritual, Spirit-filled flesh and blood of the heavenly Son of Man. Verse 58 ties the homily together by referring back to the central phrase of v.31. [Flanagan, 991-92]

Where the other gospel writers have told the story, John delivers a rich exposition of the meaning of Jesus-as-Bread-of-Life theme. Jesus is first of all the *giver* of the bread, a new Moses. He is also the *bread of wisdom and revelation* who nourishes all who come to him in faith. He is, finally, the *Eucharistic* source of eternal life for all who eat and drink the flesh and blood of the heavenly and glorified Son of Man. This is John's explanation of the meaning of Jesus' person and the gift of the Eucharist. For his reader, already familiar with the other narratives of the Last Supper, the celebration there is the actualization of what John 6 described. What John achieves by this narrative is to unite in this one chapter the essentials of Christian Eucharist, the word and the bread — the revealing word of verses 35–47 and the sacramental bread of verses 48–59.

That is the “big picture.” Let us turn to the details of this amazing discourse.

A Missing Piece

The text from the previous Sunday (18th Sunday) centers around Jesus challenging the people's motivation for coming to Jesus. He tells them they only came to see more signs, eat their fill, but not really “work” for the bread that is eternal. The people not only do not understand Jesus' point, but become bogged down in “what do I have to do to get it” as though they could accomplish this on their own talents and perseverance. Jesus' response is that all one needs to do is believe – and the conversation returns to “show us another sign” and they up the ante – “and make it better than the one Moses did in the dessert.” Dodd notes that “The ‘signs’ which the people expect from the Messiah are mere miracles; yet when they see a miracle they fail to see the ‘sign’; for to the evangelist a *σημεῖον* is not, in essence, a miraculous act, but a significant act, one which, for the seeing eye and the understanding mind, symbolizes eternal realities.” It is at this juncture that returns to the theme of “bread from heaven” only not the one, like the manna in the desert that will spoil, but one that will last forever.

And we pick up last week's gospel:

³² 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. ³³ For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” ³⁴ So they said to him, “Sir, give us this bread always.” ³⁵ 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.”

Here are the verses that our Sunday gospel sequence does not include.

³⁶ But I told you that although you have seen (me), you do not believe. ³⁷ Everything that the Father gives me will come to me, and I will not reject anyone who comes to me, ³⁸ because I came down from heaven not to do my own will but the will of the one who sent me. ³⁹ And this is the will of the one who sent me, that I should not lose anything of what he gave me, but that I should raise it (on) the last day. ⁴⁰ For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in him may have eternal life, and I shall raise him (on) the last day.”

This text simply reinforces the *midrash* argument being brought forward: Jesus is bread from heaven, feeding all believers, in the same sense that Old Testament wisdom nourished all who accepted it (Prov 9:1–5). It is interesting to see this Sapiential wisdom played out in the chiasmic pattern of the verses

A – seeing and not believing (v.36)

B – Jesus will not drive away those who come to him (v.37)

C – I have come down from heaven (v.38)

B' – Jesus will lose nothing of all that God gives him (v.39)

A' – seeing and believing (v.40)

As O'Day [603] nicely points out: “John 6:36–37, and 39–40 present the delicate balance between the human faith response (vv. 36, 40) and God's initiative in “giving” (δίδομι *didōmi*) people to Jesus (vv. 37, 39). The key to maintaining the balance is expressed in v. 38: Jesus has come down from heaven (cf. 3:13) to make God's will visible and accessible to humankind. Faith in Jesus is impossible without God's initiating will for the world, but human beings retain responsibility for the decision they make in response to God's initiative (cf. 3:16–21).”

The Grumbling

⁴¹ *The Jews murmured about him because he said, “I am the bread that came down from heaven,”⁴² and they said, “Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph? Do we not know his father and mother? Then how can he say, ‘I have come down from heaven’?”*

As with the encounter with Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman at the well, the dialogue reveals more about Jesus and his mission, but the revelation does not necessarily lead to understanding.

Jesus' words were not what the people wanted to hear. From the miraculous feeding of the 5,000 to the crowd's references to manna in the desert, the context has been about bread they could eat. However, from v.35 onward, it is clear that Jesus' meaning is about belief in himself, the one who provides bread from heaven that lasts forever. The people are beginning to understand that they are not getting more bread and that this person before them is claiming to be someone greater than Moses. They rebel against the claims implied in what he said, feeling that they know very well who he is. In the face of this Jesus emphatically repeats his words. And the people grumble some more.

The verb “grumble” (*gongyzō*) is the word use in the LXX (Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures) to describe the Israelites' grumbling and complaints in the wilderness (e.g., Exod 15:24; 16:2, 7, 12; Num 11:1; 14:2, 27; Ps 105:24–25; cf. 1 Cor 10:10). Verse 41 is another instance of exodus imagery at work in John 6; the crowd demonstrates the same recalcitrance as their forebears. The focus of the crowd's grumbling is Jesus' claim that he is the bread that has come down from heaven.

O'Day [603] points out: “John 6 has the heaviest concentration of language about Jesus' heavenly descent anywhere in the Fourth Gospel (6:33, 38, 41–42, 50–51, 58). Moreover, this descent language does not recur after this chapter. Descent language, introduced in 3:13, seems to be used in chap. 6 to solidify the connection between the manna miracle and Jesus' revelation of himself as the bread of life. The manna of Exodus 16 was bread that came down from heaven, but Jesus' claims of his own heavenly descent, coupled with the “I am” statement of v. 35, show him to be the true bread from heaven. Jesus, not the manna, is God's life-giving gift to the world (cf. 3:16; 6:32).”

The grumbling turns into open protest of Jesus' claim and self-identification on the grounds that they know his parents. Although the Fourth Gospel contains no infancy narrative and makes no direct reference to the birth story traditions, it seems likely that 6:42 is an ironic allusion to those traditions (see also 7:41–42). Jesus is the son of God (1:17); his earthly family holds no key to his identity. The people's misplaced certitude about Jesus' origins blinds them to his true origins.

One wonders if John relies on the reader's familiarity with the stories of Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman at the well. While not explicitly said, the people of John 6 are willing to accept Jesus in an incremental manner as did the Samaritan woman. They can accept Jesus as one possessing wisdom, a prophet, and even a miracle worker, but claims beyond that reach the impasse faced by Nicodemus: “*Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one can do these signs that you*

are doing unless God is with him.” But they have come as far as they are able because they are bound by what they think they know who Jesus is.

Coming to the Lord

⁴³ Jesus answered and said to them, “Stop murmuring among yourselves. ⁴⁴ No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draw him, and I will raise him on the last day.

Jesus now addresses the crowd for a second time and tells them to stop their grumbling. Then he repeats the saying of v.37, but in a slightly stronger form. In v.37 the word “come” (*hēxei*) is the future, active voice and means that the person (subject) will be in the process of “coming.” But in v.44 the subject is God who will *helkysē* (draw, haul by force – EDNT v.1:435) the person to him. In the midst of everyone considering the great Eucharistic questions posed by John 6, it is easy to pass over one of the great doctrines of the Gospel and the Christian faith: divine initiative. John Calvin, the Protestant reformer, held that such divine initiative was irresistible –and if irresistible, then God chose who to save and who to condemn and thus held to “double predestination.” The 4th century British monk, Pelegius (or at least his followers) held that people, theoretically, could come to Jesus (and salvation) on their own. The Catholic Church holds both of these positions to be in error. But that does leave the question of human involvement. “God created man a rational being, conferring on him the dignity of a person who can initiate and control his own actions. God willed that man should be “left in the hand of his own counsel,” so that he might of his own accord seek his Creator and freely attain his full and blessed perfection by cleaving to him.” The church clearly calls this God’s “plan of love.” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §1730). All this certainly does not rehearse arguments for each position, but simply states how a simple verse has been seen throughout the ages.

To that understanding of the “plan of love,” Borgen sees the verb (*helkysē*) as a legal term, equivalent to the Hebrew מִשַׁר (which it often renders in LXX), and which means “to take possession of” (i.e., by drawing the object to oneself). Borgen regards Jesus as the agent of the Father and understands this verse to mean, “only those of whom the sender (through the agent) takes the actual possession are received by the agent, and nobody else.” But this implies acceptance, cooperation, and willingness on the part of the person to be drawn. The great missionary scholar Lesslie Newbigin wrote, in speaking of evangelization, that it is “God who sends Jesus for souls, on the other hand, draws souls to Jesus. The two divine works, external and internal, answer to and complete each other. The happy moment in which they meet in the heart, and in which the will is thus gained, is that of the *gift* on God’s part, of *faith* on man’s part. . . . faith becomes possible when one abandons hold on one’s own security, and to abandon one’s security is nothing else than to let oneself be drawn by the Father” (*The Light Has Come* [Grand Rapids, 1982] 231).

In the midst of all this, while we might lose a sense of focus, not for one moment does Jesus lose his sense of mission. For the third time he refers to his future activity of raising up his people on the last day (v.44).

Teaching, believing, and having life. ⁴⁵ *It is written in the prophets: ‘They shall all be taught by God.’ Everyone who listens to my Father and learns from him comes to me. ⁴⁶ Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father. ⁴⁷ Amen, amen, I say to you, whoever believes has eternal life.*

In v.44 Jesus has restated the central theological themes of the preceding discourse: God’s initiative in drawing people to Jesus and the promise of resurrection on the last day. At the beginning of v.45 he gives those themes scriptural support by appealing to “the prophets.” The OT verse cited in seems to be a paraphrase of the LXX of Isaiah 54:13, although its content also recalls Jer 31:33. The citation underscores God’s initiative in making faith possible and the universality of God’s actions (“they shall *all* be taught . . .”). The emphasis on God’s role and the appeal to Scripture build on the list of witnesses developed in 5:31–40 (John the Baptist, the signs, the Father, and the Spirit). Jesus’ claims are grounded in God’s work of the sign and in Jesus’ relationship with the Father. They cannot simply be dismissed as Jesus’ own, unfounded assertion.

At the end of the verse, Jesus alludes to another theme of 6:36–40: the faith response. “Hearing” (*akouō*) and “learning” (*manthanō*) in v. 45 function analogously to “seeing” and “believing” in vv. 36 and 40; they are metaphors for human receptivity to what God offers. Verse 45 states that God’s teaching is offered to all, but the latter part of the verse suggests that only those who hear and learn what God teaches will come to Jesus. As in 6:36–40, God’s initiative toward humanity is held in tension with human decision and response. The emphasis on teaching, hearing, and learning in vv. 44–45 suggests that the reason for the crowd’s grumbling lies in their perception, not in Jesus’ claims. God has taught them (v. 44), but they do not hear and learn (cf. 5:37).

Yet even those who learn from the Father do not see the Father. Verse 46 reasserts Jesus’ unique relationship to God, recalling the conclusion of the Prologue 1:18 (“*No one has ever seen God. The only Son, God, who is at the Father’s side, has revealed Him.*”). For the Fourth Evangelist, it is through Logos-Jesus alone that the believer has access to God the Father (5:23, 38, 42–43; 14:6–9) and access to eternal life (v.47).

Eating the Living Bread. ⁴⁷ *Amen, amen, I say to you, whoever believes has eternal life.* ⁴⁸ *I am the bread of life.* ⁴⁹ *Your ancestors ate the manna in the desert, but they died;* ⁵⁰ *this is the bread that comes down from heaven so that one may eat it and not die.* ⁵¹ *I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world.*”

The expression “*Amen, amen, I say to you*” (v. 47) also signals the beginning of a new section in the discourse (as before in 5:19, 24–25; 6:32). Yet this section opens with a reprise of familiar Johannine themes: The believer receives eternal life (6:27, 40); Jesus is the bread of life (6:35). These themes provide the theological grounding for what follows. As in 5:19–30, here the Fourth Evangelist advances Jesus’ argument by placing what Jesus has said previously in a new context. The interweaving and overlapping of theological themes evident here and throughout Jesus’ discourses help to create a cohesiveness of theological perspective throughout the Fourth Gospel

Jesus completes the comparison between the bread of heaven of which the crowd speaks and the bread of heaven of which he speaks. Previously, we read: ³¹ *Our ancestors ate manna in the desert, as it is written: ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’*” ³² *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.’* ³³ *For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.*” As noted already, Jesus’ words in 6:32–33 can be seen as his reinterpretation of the OT scripture cited by the crowd in 6:31. In vv. 50–51, Jesus continues to interpret that citation, this time focusing on the verb “to eat” (*esthiō*) – “...*this is the bread that comes down from heaven so that one may eat it and not die.*” ⁵¹ *I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world.*”

The manna eaten by the ancestors in the wilderness met the Israelites’ immediate needs for sustenance, but did not satisfy ultimate human needs; the ancestors died. The bread from heaven of which Jesus speaks, however, does satisfy ultimate human need. Those who eat the true bread from heaven (cf. 6:32) receive the gift of eternal life. The promise that no one will die (v. 50) is analogous to the promise that no one will hunger or thirst again (6:35): “*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.’*”

In v. 51, Jesus takes his interpretation of the verb “to eat” one step further. He begins by repeating his self-identification as the bread from heaven (v. 51a). “Living bread” (a synonym for “bread of life”), like the “living water” of 4:10–14, is life-giving. To underscore this, Jesus then repeats that eating this bread will give eternal life (v. 51b; cf. v. 50). He concludes his words with a dramatic twist, however: “The bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh” (v. 51c).

What does it mean for Jesus to speak of the gift of his flesh for the life of the world? First, the language at the end of v.51 recalls both 1:14 (“and the Word became flesh”) and 3:16 (“God so loved the world that he gave his only Son”). Verse 51 thus evokes the incarnation, the gift of Jesus’ life out of God’s love for the world. Second, it is possible to see an allusion to Jesus’ death in the language of v. 51c: Jesus will give up his life, his flesh, as an expression of the same love manifested in the incarnation (10:17–19; 15:13). Finally, any Christian reader of v. 51, from the Fourth Gospel’s first audience to the contemporary church, would hear eucharistic connotations in these words. The eucharistic imagery is not yet fully explicit (that will occur in vv. 52–58), but the direction of the imagery for the Christian reader is clear.

If the people were grumbling before, now they have move to a more serious contention: “*The Jews quarreled among themselves, saying, ‘How can this man give us (his) flesh to eat?’*” v.52)

NOTES

John 6:41 *Jews*. Most scholars note that it is a bit odd to suddenly shift to a description of the people as “the Jews.” In John 6 they have been described as ‘*the crowd*’ (2, 22, 24) or ‘*the people*’ (10, 14), or simply referred to as ‘*they*’ or ‘*them*’. Also, up to this point there is a tendency for John to reserve that moniker for the leadership in Jerusalem, something he returns to in the Passion narratives. Scholars do not believe the use here, clearly connected with non-belief, is meant to characterize the whole people, but only those who, like the leaders, refuse to see past the signs to the deeper revelation from God. ***grumble***: as their Israelite forefathers grumbled in the wilderness (Exod. 16:2, 7, 12)

John 6:42 *the son of Joseph*: This is the second of only two occasions in the Fourth Gospel when Jesus is referred to as ‘the son of Joseph’ (1:45; 6:42).

John 6:44 *drawn*: In rabbinic sources the same word (in Hebrew) translated as “drawn” is the expression used to described a Gentile being brought close to the Torah and thus to conversion.

John 6:47 *Amen, Amen, I say to you*: Moloney, a Johannine expert, says that John’s use of this expression is generally not stating “what follows is true, so pay attention,” but is used to link what came before with what follows. He offers a more contextual translation as “because this is the case.”

John 6:49 *your ancestors*: This a change in Jesus’ language from v.31 when he spoke of “our ancestors.” It might point to one of several instances (8:17 and 8:56) when “your Law” and “your father Abraham” may well point to the later deep division between the synagogue and the church.

John 6:51 *the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh*: Many of the words in this verse (*ho artos, sarx, ego doso, hyper*) reflect the celebration of the Eucharist and serve as an introduction to vv.51-58, considered the core of John’s Eucharistic theology.

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