

Tough Crowd
Thirteenth Sunday After Pentecost
August 23, 2015
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Text: John 6

Introduction to the Gospel Lesson ~ John 6:56-69

For those of you who have been here for 5 weeks in a row, you may be tracking that it's taken a long time to get through John chapter 6 – this is the 5th Sunday in a row in John 6 and it's been all about bread, each week. So for the rest of us who haven't been here 5 weeks in a row, the good news is that you can catch up fairly easily. John 6 is nothing if not thorough on the theme of bread – one might say even a bit repetitive – Jesus as the bread of life, his flesh to eat, his blood to drink - if you count up bread and blood and eating and flesh, they're mentioned about 60 times or so. It all starts with the miracle of the feeding of the 5000 – bread for all – and then John 6 continues as a dialogue of Jesus and the crowds about bread. In this reading we finally come to the conclusion, and as thorough as the exploration of bread has been, at the end some interesting things happen:

In honor of the presidential pre-primary season – an ongoing and interminable season – instead of calling John 6 the 'BREAD' chapter, I am going to call it: 'The Rise and Fall of Candidate Jesus' – because that is what happens in this long chapter, at least in terms of Jesus' popularity. In a political race, the field of candidates is closely watched for who is surging or fading in popularity, and there are always lots of ebbs and flows, stars rising and falling; although so far this cycle it seems that one of the candidates whom the pundits keep saying will fade, hasn't yet – we'll see. Meanwhile, in John 6, Jesus is an early leader in the 'who we want to be the Messiah race' – the Gospels paint a picture of this being a unique time in which many people in Israel were watching, expecting a leader blessed by God - a Messiah, Savior - and in that political climate Jesus emerges from obscurity onto the national stage. As a candidate he is starting to draw big crowds – and when he miraculously feeds them all, well, the crowd goes wild. They cannot get enough of Jesus – they pursue him – want to know his every move and hang on his every word; the Jesus wave is riding high. But then as we arrive at the end of the chapter in the verses we read, the wheels fall off the popularity train. Here's what happens:

- Jesus says, again: ‘eat my flesh and drink my blood – do this and you will live forever’
 - many who are described as disciples of Jesus say: ‘this teaching is difficult – who can accept it?’
 - Jesus says: ‘what I say offends you? this is just the start; what I say is life, is spirit – but I know some of you don’t believe it; my Father will bring to me those who do believe’
 - v.66: ‘because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him’
- When the next poll is published, Jesus’ numbers are going to be way down.

This is, I think, an intriguing and important moment, turn, in the story. Because what I have been wondering about, is what is it that those who had been following Jesus found to be so troublesome? - ‘this teaching is difficult!’ What do you think? I’m not entirely sure – but I have an idea - here’s what I think: what made Jesus so popular was that the crowds saw in him someone who could give them what they wanted; what made his popularity plummet is that Jesus insisted on giving them instead what they needed. Jesus has what they want, but gives what they need - what do you think about that?

Perhaps it sounds too cliché to begin with the feeding of the 5000 at the beginning of this chapter, but isn’t that the classic example of someone who can give these folks what they want? – a free lunch! This miracle really motivates the crowds – they flock after Jesus looking for more; looking for another free lunch itself I suppose, but to give the crowds a bit more credit, aren’t they more deeply seeing in Jesus and wanting someone who will take care of them? someone who will provide for them? That’s a pretty basic human desire – we all like to be taken care of and certainly that’s something we all need at times in life. But I don’t think with the miraculous feeding of the 5000, that Jesus intended to reveal God as the ultimate divine free lunch -what if such an act has instead more to do with revealing the abundance of what God has already given – enough for all? - what if such a gift is meant to draw one away from life’s pursuit of more and into a life of gratitude? I’m just saying that this ‘BREAD’ chapter, this ‘rise and fall of Candidate Jesus’ chapter, can be read as revealing a fault line for who God is and how God is seen: is God a divine free lunch, there to take care of us? or...since that’s probably not the right answer, then what? who is God?

Well that's what Jesus delves into as the bread discussion goes on and on – and I would try to summarize it this way: Jesus says that God is the one who nourishes us with true life; Jesus says that he IS the nourishment from God that feeds, sustains, strengthens one in such life – a life that resonates with God's Spirit. So there is here the doubly challenging word from Jesus, not only that God is the One who claims and forms our lives (God is not just a free lunch) but also that Jesus is the One through whom God makes that claim. 'This teaching is difficult' – that's what the disciples say, not just people in the crowd but those who are close followers of Jesus; 'this teaching is difficult - who can accept it?'

Well –seems we have accepted it! – here we are: a Christian Church proclaiming Jesus as God with us! - difficult for other people maybe, but not for us! But part of what I've been thinking about this passage is how important it is to affirm what those disciples of Jesus say: 'this teaching is difficult'! – because I think that as soon as we lose some of the tension, some of the challenge, some of the difficulty, in what Jesus says, that we need to listen for it again.

But let's ease into that difficulty by critiquing some other folks first ☺ that's always easier; because this passage does offer some commentary on things around us. As this BREAD chapter critiques a view of God as a divine free lunch, there to give what the people want, we find today that it is still a religious view very much at home in our world. Within Christianity today there is a thriving 'prosperity gospel' that promises material blessings for the faithful. Perhaps you've seen it in sensational stories of religious leaders, ministers, accumulating huge fortunes from the gifts of their congregations – that is despicable enough on its own, but equally insidious is the toxic spirituality that is nurtured: people told to view of God as a divine ATM, there to pay out if they can get the right access; or people left bitter when their investment does not give the promised returns. The whole prosperity package makes a mockery of the gospel and has no place in the church. And what's so disturbing about such 'prosperity – free lunch – theology' is that it is really just another expression of a 'God is on our side' theology that too often rules the spirituality of our world. There are a lot of examples of such spirituality to explore – personal/communal –

religious/political; it's any adherence to a false god who is there just to prop up your/my/our cause as God's own.

And that's what brings the difficulty, the challenge of Jesus' teaching home to us – what Jesus speaks of is a faith in him that will always and must always be difficult for us too; because Jesus speaks of an abiding in God that nourishes in God's ways, that feeds one in the Spirit's call – and God's ways will always be difficult to live out in our lives; if not, then we're missing something. Now I will at any time and with full conviction speak to you of God as our provider, our comforter, our sustainer – of God as the One who loves us fully and whose grace we can trust completely; but none of that has anything to do with God giving us what we want rather than what we need – nothing to do with God being on our side or promoting our cause. The goodness of God is God challenging, abiding with us to form us more deeply in God's ways.

And that is difficult. When I see all the racial tension and violence and division in our country today – there are times I want to throw up my hands not knowing what to do; there are times I want to look the other way; there are times I feel judged and guilty. But Jesus challenges, calls us to be nourished by the Spirit who brings reconciliation and healing and unity to life – to face such issues of race and racism as part of our faith – 'this teaching is difficult' – thanks be to God.

When I try to comprehend the economic disparities of our time; try to have a sense of my own place in the spectrum of haves and have nots in this world; when I am aware of all I have, and the food I have, and that I want more; it can all feel paralyzing – not knowing what to do or how to make things better. But Jesus calls to a faith that is grateful, is generous, that sees God's abundance as available to all on this good earth. It is a good and hopeful call but it is difficult – it challenges me to try, to hope, to listen again for the Spirit's ways of justice – compassion - generosity.

There are challenging issues/realities – and in the midst of such a world Jesus embodies a calling that does not turn from such challenges but insists that we look to God in Christ as the Spirit of life who nourishes us in the ways of life. This is good, but it is difficult to stick with...but

not everyone leaves. As the crowds start to diminish, Jesus looks around and sees some left – it is the 12 disciples (but believe me, there were some women too!) – and Jesus asks: ‘Are you going to leave me too?’ And good old Peter says – ‘Lord - you’re all we’ve got!’ – not the most convincing start – but Peter adds: ‘you have the words of life – you are the Holy presence of God.’

As we listen in on this story, it speaks to our lives and world. Our faith is not an ‘in’ with God or a pathway to privilege; it is the confession that we in our hearts place our lot with this One, Jesus Christ, in whom we hear the words of life. There are many things we want – and much we are told by our world that we need; but we find in Christ the bread of life that truly nourishes our humanity – our need to abide in the Spirit of life who calls us into true community with one another. It is a calling, a challenge, a faith that does not claim God for our own but which hears the claim of God to bring true life to all God’s children. It is a difficult teaching – and it is the way of life - thanks be to God. AMEN.