

Holy Bread for Holy Hunger – A Sermon on John 6:35, 41-51; Proper 14B

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It was supposed to be another feeding, or so they thought. That’s why everyone showed up in today’s gospel. Instead of more bread they got Jesus and conflict. The two often go together. It seems that when we run into Jesus we often get conflict; between what is and what might be, between our understanding and his understanding, between knowing about Jesus and really knowing him.

Yesterday, in John’s gospel, Jesus fed 5000 people with five loaves and two fish. Today he challenges the people to consider what kind of bread they are seeking and eating, perishable or imperishable, then he declares himself to be “the bread of life,” “the living bread that came down from heaven.” That’s when the conflict started.

“The Jews began to complain about Jesus. “He didn’t come from heaven. We know all about him. He’s Mary and Joseph’s boy.” They know facts about Jesus but they don’t really know him or where he comes from. He doesn’t look a thing like the bread they or their ancestors have eaten. When it comes to bread they don’t expect any more than what their ancestors got, manna in the wilderness.

Jesus tells them to be quiet and stop complaining. “Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died.... 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.” Jesus offers them a choice, living bread or manna, life or death. That is the same choice he sets before us.

On the surface it seems to be a conflict between Jesus and the Jews. In reality the conflict is not outside of the Jews. It is within them. That’s how it is with conflict. It originates within us and gets projected onto and fought with another.

The conflict for the Jews is not so much about Jesus but about their frame of reference, the box they have created for God. Jesus is challenging them to step outside of the established, comfortable, and familiar context they have created for themselves. He refuses to be limited by either their understandings or their misunderstandings. He invites them to live a new life, a larger life, a life that springs from but is not bound by the past or the context they have created for themselves. He invites them to eat new bread.

When John speaks of the Jews he is not referring to the Jewish people, individually or collectively. He is referring to any person or group who opposes Jesus, who refuses to see and

understand the signs, who would separate the gift of bread from the giver of life. The Jews could be anyone who acts in this way. In this case it just happens to be the religious leaders and authorities of Jesus' day.

We are not so different from the Jews. We too have our own frames of reference. Sometimes we use our frame of reference to try to contain or control God. Other times we use it to exclude God. The problem is not that we have a frame of reference, but that it originates with us rather than with God.

When we live only from our personal frame of reference we live hungry, empty lives. We work for manna rather than opening ourselves to receive the gift of the bread of life. No matter how much manna we collect and eat we can never satisfy ourselves. Manna might fill our bellies but it leaves our souls grumbling.

Often the things we have done and left undone prevent us from eating the bread of life. Sometimes our patterns of thinking, believing, the way we see the world, each other, or ourselves convince us there is no other bread and we should just settle for the same old manna our ancestors ate in the wilderness. Other times our history, fears, anxieties, guilt, regrets, pain, and losses become so firmly established we are deceived into believing that we are not even hungry.

It does not have to be like that. The table of God is set and there is a place for each one of us. We are not destined to eat manna the rest of our lives. Our frame of reference, our past, our history, neither earn us nor keep us from the bread of life. Rather, the living bread has come down from heaven to feed each one of us. Every moment of every day God invites us to eat new bread, to step out of the old context into a new way of living and being.

God gives us bread from heaven, knowing that we are hungry. Our conflicts, our restlessness, our deep longings, our desires to love and be loved are hunger pains by which the Father draws us to his Son; the one who said, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

Holy bread for holy hunger. The gift of God for the people of God.

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