

PENTECOST XI Proper 14 August 8, 2021 St. Alban's Staten Island

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

This week, we continue our study of chapter 6 (verses 35 and 41-51) of John's gospel with its emphasis on the theme of *bread from heaven*. After any number of gospel passages on that topic in this Pentecost season, one can be forgiven for thinking that all of this bread imagery is just a bit over-the-top. However, when John's gospel offers us so much commentary on the topic, it makes sense to try to wring as much meaning from the discourse described here as possible. That is what I hope to help us with this morning. Remember that the community for whom John's gospel was written was wrestling with the very same concepts we struggle with in our own day. It is, thus, a very contemporary passage.

As I explained last week, Jesus in this episode is trying to get the crowd to understand the difference between consuming bread to meet one's bodily needs and doing so in a spiritual way (that is, recognizing that Jesus is God's special messenger who provides *salvation*, however we define that notoriously difficult concept, salvation rather than mere cessation of hunger). What is new in today's passage, however, is that Jesus is beginning to use language anticipating the Lord's Supper ---- *eucharistic* language, even though the actual Lord's Supper will not occur until the Passion. Here he suggests that the bread of heaven is his flesh ("*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.*"). That is, we are dealing here with metaphorical bread, or something *even beyond* that level of meaning.

And the metaphorical is actually one of the more difficult concepts to comprehend fully in all of the New Testament. The physical we understand. The actual we can see and taste. The metaphorical ---- well, that is something altogether different. I think it's easy for us to think of these first century crowds as naive, unsophisticated, stubbornly locked into physical reality. But I would suggest to you that we are no more enlightened in our ever-so-modern 21st century. Think for a moment about what it must have been like for European missionaries in a place like Africa in the not very distant past to try to explain "the real presence of Christ" in the communion bread. This is described in a number of unforgettable passages in The Lonely African by Colin Turnbull which I used to have my students read when I was teaching European and world history. There was no way to get these native-speakers from a world so different from Europe to get beyond the idea that our Lord's Supper is really little more than cannibalism. Imagine that! We see these native Africans themselves as only a few steps removed from cannibalism (just think of all those Johnny Weissmuller Tarzan movies from the 1930s through the 1950s!), and yet we introduced the idea of the Eucharistic meal and asked them to get beyond the literal level and comprehend the metaphorical. Aren't these the very words Europe shed blood over in the religious wars of the 16th and 17th centuries?

I would suggest to you that the ideas inherent in the Christian Lord's Supper are very difficult to penetrate even for those of us who grew up in the church. Just listen to the words in the prayer book:

“Take, eat: This is my Body, which is given for you. Do this for the remembrance of me.” “Drink this, all of you, This is my Blood of the new Covenant, which is shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. Whenever you drink it, do this for the remembrance of me.” We hear those words every Sunday of our lives as Episcopalians, but I am not at all sure that most of us really understand them. And perhaps that is why we have to hear them over and over again, because they are difficult ideas. They are metaphorical concepts which are notoriously hard for us to truly grasp. And even within the Episcopal church there is nothing like universal agreement about what “the real presence of Christ” in the communion elements really means. Those religious disagreements from the period of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation remain unresolved even in our modern age which claims to be rational, analytical and scientific in the way it approaches controversy over the meaning of things.

But in the discourse which follows the feeding miracle, the language used is not only metaphorical but *sacramental* in nature. Another really difficult idea to digest --- sacramental. This problem of language continues to plague the discourse. To clarify the notion of what is conveyed to the believer in the bread from heaven, we should add that we are not to take this to mean that we are ingesting something “that would create an infinite perpetuation of a centered and bounded self.” In other words, this isn’t about individuals achieving life immortal as an immediate consequence of having eaten the metaphorical elements of Christ’s body. The term *eternal life* needs to be delineated for us. What John seems to mean by the expression is that eternal life consists in “living in relationship with God.” That relationship begins “now through seeing and believing, through eating and drinking.” But “it never ends.” Death does not separate us from God. Something that begins now and continues forever is eternal. But some scholars would go further and describe the return of the incarnate Word as described in these words from the prologue to John’s gospel: *“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God.”* ---- its return from being *with* God and actually *being* God to a place of “mutuality and unity with God” in Christ as explained in this passage as somehow scandalous. Why is this so? It is so because “it is something new for God and for the world, something which *transgresses the boundaries between God and the world.*”

This scandalous theme is illustrated by the reaction of traditional Jews to the claims of Jesus. This reaction to the idea of “God’s presence in Jesus Christ” recalls the kind of murmuring and grumbling which characterized the people of Israel in their deliverance from bondage in Egypt. “God’s presence is not a new experience for them, but what *is* new is that God’s presence is now incarnated in the one who speaks the ‘I am’.” These Jews knew Mary and Joseph, people just like themselves, so how was this possible, that their very human son had become God? This revelation of God is, after all, very sensory ---- *seeing, hearing, learning, being drawn*, all for the purpose of believing.” But by contrast with the story of the grumbling Israelites in the wilderness who ate manna from heaven “but also died,” Jesus is saying that if they eat this bread which is the living embodiment of the one who speaks in “I am” phrases, they will live forever because this bread is the flesh of Jesus, the Son of God.

Is it any wonder, then, that there is pushback from the very people out of whom arose these concepts of a Messiah who would come to save his people? Historically, that concept was assumed to point to a human being with extraordinary political and military skills who would crush the Roman occupying power, not an itinerant preacher who spoke nonsense such as the idea that a human being like they were could be God himself. So, one of the immediate offshoots of this discourse on *bread from heaven* is growing anger about Jesus on religious grounds, on grounds of making claims that were heretical for traditional Jews. That murmuring and remembering led to argument and dispute and “new heights of *opposition*.”

So, what Jesus promises here is not only metaphorical but relational. That is, relational in a truly *sacramental* sense as opposed to the merely metaphorical. What is a sacrament, after all? It is a religious ritual which imparts divine grace or a visible symbol of the reality of God and a channel for his grace. So, there is, in fact, “a movement in the text away from thinking about God in terms of substance (in terms of how it deals with the definition I just gave you) and towards *relationality*.” This “transformed divinity” of Jesus as the embodiment of God “is communicated through the supper” itself. This is a shift away from *consuming* something to *being transformed by* the act of eating and drinking, not simply having divine grace imparted to us or *experienced* in a symbolic way. And let me add that this idea of “the real presence” is not limited to Roman Catholics and high church Episcopalians, it can also be found in certain Protestant traditions. I recall seeing a Swiss minister in the Zwinglian heritage (an offshoot of Lutheranism) saying on film that even though she came out of a tradition that viewed communion as purely symbolic, her own experience in distributing communion had led her to believe that there is something else going on there: a real and *tangible* communal link between priest and believer. To me, that says “real presence.”

Jesus says, “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so *whoever eats me will live because of me*.” And perhaps one way of understanding this is to recognize that “over time, ‘manna’ in the history of Israel had become a symbol for far more than the flaky bread-like stuff the Israelites received in the desert. Manna became, at the very least, a symbol of the real presence of God and the Word of God generally, and possibly more: as in, *a real relational bonding* with Christ. And from there it is not so far from speaking of “the real presence of Christ” in the communion wafer as the idea developed in the context of the historical church in the West. As one scholar puts it, “the original manna was great. It was a true life-saver. It signaled the presence of God among his people in a place of death. But it was, in the end, a temporary fix. It was part of the story of salvation, not the whole story and not the climax of that story. If anything, it could only point toward the greater Bread from heaven that was yet to come.”

Thanks be to God. In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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