

**Feb. 16, 2014**

**John 6:35-59 - Bread of Life**

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Jesus' first sign in John's Gospel is his turning of water into wine at a party to celebrate a wedding, which I take to be both an affirmation of the joy of physical life and a reference to, a foretaste of the heavenly feast to come. A couple chapters after the wine, we get living water and the woman at the well. A couple chapters after that, and we get the bread from heaven. Next week, we'll get some more living water. You see how John is dancing around sacramental symbols of the waters of baptism and the bread and wine of communion. But as deep and as vital as baptism and communion are—and they are vital; they are physical means of God's grace; they are mystical and physical faith growing—as vital as they are, John in his Gospel is trying to take them to a whole new level.

OK, now we're ready for chapter 6. It's got the first of the "I am" sayings of Jesus. Here's the main thing you want to know about these sayings: they all about Jesus' relationship to us. The one in today's reading is, "I am the bread of life." That's about feeding us. The other six are: "I am the light of the world" (8:12), "the gate for the sheep" (10:7), "the good shepherd" (10:11), "the resurrection and the life" (11:25), "the way, and the truth, and the life" (14:6), and "the true vine" (15:1). They're all about relationship; they're all about how we are connected to Jesus or about something Jesus does for us.

And here's the other thing about these "I am" sayings, especially the one for today: they're all offensive. At least they are offensive in a pluralistic world like ours has become and like John's always was, because they make some pretty strong, exclusive claims. As we read and meditate on John's Gospel over these months leading up to Easter, keep in mind these two opposites: 1) Jesus makes very exclusive claims about himself and his mission like, "No one comes to the father except through me and 2) God loves the entire world that is unbelieving and in rebellion against God, and God will stop at nothing to win it over.

The other thing that is offensive about what Jesus says today is that, not to put too fine a point on it, it's gross. "Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life."

We are quite used to receiving a piece of bread and a sip of wine with the words, "The body of Christ; the blood of Christ." Familiarity has removed the offensive nature of these words. But to a Jew, who is forbidden from consuming the blood even of animals, the thought of drinking a human being's blood is so bizarre that it's completely beyond even thinking about. You can imagine Jesus' followers saying, "What!? Did he *actually* say that?" No wonder so many of them left Jesus and went home. John makes no effort to soften the tone of what Jesus says or to minimize the results Jesus' words produce. Quite the opposite.

Why? Maybe because John wants to take our understanding of faith and the Sacraments to a whole new, much deeper level. Jesus feeds the 5,000 before he ever starts talking about the living

bread from heaven. Jesus attends to their physical needs. But there is physical life and there is a real living. You can be alive but not have real life. Real life is being in relationship to the God of creation, the God who made you, the God with whom you will spend eternity. This relationship with God is eternal life. It's more than what happens when you die; it's what happens now, too.

This eternal life means having Jesus living not just alongside you but also within you. If you're a Jew, you know that you don't drink the blood of animals because life is in the blood. So you understand that Jesus is saying real life is having his life and his relationship with God the Father inside you. Jesus does not present us with a God who wants to be appeased or sacrificed to or otherwise mollified. Jesus presents us with a God who wants to draw us into real life, eternal life.

And how does God propose to do this? "And I when I am lifted up will draw all people to myself." That's what Jesus says about his cross. Lent is still two and a half weeks away, and I'm probably blowing my Ash Wednesday sermon, but here goes. Lent is often a time for contemplating and meditating on the cross. We don't focus on the cross to pity poor Jesus. And the focus is not on feeling in debt to Jesus; it's not a "When I think of what he did for me!" time.

No, if we listen to John's Gospel Lent is a time to focus on and be drawn in by God's amazing love carried out on the cross of Jesus. This is where Jesus gives his flesh for the life of the world. Contemplating on this, eating and drinking it in so that it and Jesus himself live inside us is eternal life. This life will make you Jesus' disciple. This life will fill you up so that you hunger and thirst for the presence of God and yet are never hungry or thirsty again because you have the life of God in Christ within you. This life will propel you out into the world doing God's mission. I want you to come to our Tennebrae service on Good Friday. I want you to leave that service having been drawn into God's amazing love.

I'm going to add to our ongoing sermon challenge. In addition to the really hard one I'm asking us all to work on this month, I'm also asking you to read through the whole Gospel of John.