

February 13, 2022

John 6:1-15, 22-59

Rev. Kelley L. Becker

Sermon and Scripture

For those who are blissfully unaware, today is Super Bowl Sunday. I am not much of a sports ball fan, but being a glass half full type person, I do try to eek out some enjoyment from all of the hoopla. First, I love the commercials, so I thought I would share one of my favorites with you today:

***VIDEO**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DoM6lhFY8No>

That goat has attitude and I like it. This particular commercial highlights another thing I love about the Super Bowl...snacks. Super Bowl food is the best food. Our house favorite is buffalo wings. What about you? Let's hear it. What are your favorites?

It's going to be a delicious day!

As we've illustrated, food is an important part of our lives. So much so that, in many respects, we no longer eat to live, we live to eat. The evidence of that is all around us: in the ads on television and social media, as we drive down streets lined with fast food restaurants, even here at church. It is rare to walk in this building and not be offered a cookie. To be clear, that is not a criticism, it is an observation. Food is all around us and most of us can have as much of it as we want, any time we want it.

Because of that, to begin to understand today's text, we need to extricate ourselves from our excessive food reality and recognize that in the first century Mediterranean world from which the Gospel of John came, food was not as abundant for everyday Jewish folks as it is for middle class Americans. Food insecurity for most everyone was one drought or flood or one misstep away. Securing and preparing food was a big part of everyday life, especially for the women, in Jewish families.

As I mentioned earlier, today's text is the author of John's explanation of the story of the Feeding of the 5000. In the Gospel, the Feeding of the 5000 is found in John 6:1-15. Following that is another familiar story; the story of Jesus Walking on

Water in John 6:16-21. These two stories are always together in the gospels (except in Luke because Jesus does not walk on water in that Gospel). The reason the gospel authors put the stories together is that both are “Moses stories” that parallel stories found in the Hebrew Bible, specifically in the exodus narrative sequence. In a bit, I will talk more about how Moses looms large in the interpretation of the text. And so, it is following both of those “sign stories” that the Jesus’ explanation picks up. It’s a bit long, so I’ve asked Anna to read the text and I will add my own comments along the way.

This is John 6:25-51:

²⁵ When they (they is the crowd he had fed the day before) found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, “Rabbi, when did you come here?” ²⁶ Jesus answered them, “Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. ²⁷ Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal.”

Jesus was basically saying, “You are only looking for me because I made your bellies full yesterday. You should be looking for me because I have something you need and, unlike physical bread, it will not get moldy; it will last.”

²⁸ Then they said to him, “What must we do to perform the works of God?” ²⁹ Jesus answered them, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.” ³⁰ So they said to him, “What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing? ³¹ Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’”

Let me say this: the crowd was right there when Jesus fed all of them with a few loaves of bread and some fish. Yet they are asking Jesus for a sign before they believe in him. They are like, “That manna that fell from the sky was cool. How about a little bread from heaven for us, you know, like Moses brought our people?”

³² Then Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who 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 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 be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. ³⁶ But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe. ³⁷ Everything that the Father gives me will come to me, and anyone who comes to me I will never drive away; ³⁸ for I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me. ³⁹ And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. ⁴⁰ This is indeed the will of my Father, that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day.”

⁴¹ Then the Jews began to complain about him because he said, “I am the bread that came down from heaven.”

Just a reminder that when the author of John refers to “the Jews,” he is talking about the Jewish leaders who were responsible for John’s community being ostracized for what they believed about Jesus. John’s community was Jewish. It would be dangerous and inappropriate to use this text to further Anti-Semitic ideology.

⁴² They (the Jewish leaders) were saying, “Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, ‘I have come down from heaven?’” ⁴³ Jesus answered them, “Do not complain among yourselves. ⁴⁴ No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me; and I will raise that person up on the last day. ⁴⁵ It is written in the prophets, ‘And they shall all be taught by God.’ Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me. ⁴⁶ Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father. ⁴⁷ Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life.

Eternal life in the Gospel of John is the presence of God, having a relationship with God. This is not a promise of heaven with streets of gold and angels floating on clouds and playing the harp. It is the promise that we are in the presence of God, right now and will continue to be in the future.

And finally, Jesus says: ⁴⁸ I am the bread of life. ⁴⁹ Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. ⁵⁰ This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. ⁵¹ 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.”

This is a literary foreshadow that Jesus will eventually give up his physical being, his body, because of what he came to reveal about God to the world: “...and the Word became flesh and lived among us.”

Thank you, Anna, for giving the folks a break from my voice. That’s a lot.

Once again, we find Jesus having a conversation with people who had questions. And Jesus, bless his heart, did his best to answer them, but at times he seems to be talking in puzzles which is why the Gospel of John is tough for a lot of us. It’s important to note, again, that the voice of Jesus is at the mercy of the writer of the Gospel of John who is writing for a community of Jewish mystics. This is not the kind of writing we can treat like Joe Friday in Dragnet, “Just the facts, Ma’am.” There are no facts here. This is not a historical depiction of an actual event. This story is full of symbols, metaphors, and not so obvious connections. As is the case with a lot of the stories in John, there is not enough time to unravel it all in one sermon, so we will be left with questions.

In fact, if we were to continue reading past verse 51, Jesus’ discourse would get even farther afield and we would eventually read in verse 66, “Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him.” The painting on the screen is a depiction of that decision by some of the disciples. You can see that the ones who walked away are painted in darkness. Darkness, in the Gospel of John always represents unbelief, like in the story of.....? Nic @ Night. All of this to say, if this text confuses you, you are in good company.

The text begins with Jesus being found by the crowd he had fed the day before. Jesus’ first words to them draw attention to the crowd’s misinterpretation of the event.

Spoiler alert: This sign was not about Jesus magically multiplying bread and fish for the crowd. Jesus was not a magician.

That the crowd continued to ask for a sign from Jesus makes room in the narrative for the author's explanation of the sign.

Remember when I said that both the Feeding of the 5000 and the Jesus Walking on Water stories are Moses stories? You are probably asking, "How can that be? Moses isn't even featured in the stories." Let me explain. These stories parallel two of the most dramatic Moses stories. Any guesses which ones they are?

- Moses parting the Red Sea during the exodus
- Manna for the Israelites wandering in the wilderness

Both are survival stories. God, through Moses, saved the Israelites from death at the hands of the Egyptians by parting the Red Sea when they were being pursued by the Egyptian army. And afterward, God, through Moses, saved the Israelites from starvation with food dropped from the sky.

In John 31-34, the crowd clearly preferring the manna miracle to what they had experienced said to Jesus, "Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness...And Jesus said, "Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven."

In other words, Moses wasn't a magician either. God does the cool things and most of the time, God does them through people.

Jesus continues, "For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." And the people said, "Sir, give us this bread always." The crowd went from demanding a sign to recognizing that there was something familiar about this, like this had happened to their people before. What if Jesus possessed the power that the God of Moses possessed, not the power Moses possessed, the power God possessed? I mean...he fed a hungry crowd in the wilderness, and he had some effect on the properties of water. He walked on it and God, through Moses, parted it.

Jesus confirmed for the crowd the bread was provided by God and he offered two more unique features of the bread...it gives LIFE (capital LIFE, life abundant) and it is for the world. The mention of the world here is neat because at this point in the conversation, his conversation partner is not Jewish leaders or his disciples, but the crowd. The crowd is the world...the world referred to in John 3:16, "For God so loved the world..." The Feeding of the 5000 is a sign of God's abundant love for the world. What does abundant love look like, even taste like? Warm

fresh bread that never runs out. It's kind of like the wine that never ran out at the wedding in Cana, only better...because it's bread.

"I am the Bread of Life," is the first of seven predicated I AM statements in this Gospel. Each one of them invite us to imagine how we are or could be connected to Jesus. Jesus went on, "Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." Recall that in addition to manna, God, through Moses, also provided water from a rock for the wilderness wanderers in Exodus. Luther Seminary's Dr. Karoline Lewis writes, "That which God provided for God's people in the wilderness, Jesus now offers to the crowd. Jesus is able to give what God gives. Bread and water are quite literally bread and water, but they also represent life, especially life in the midst of dire circumstances."

Again, remembering the situation into which this text was written is key. It is not an overflowing grocery cart or all you can eat buffet that represented abundance to John's community. It was, quite simply, bread and water which symbolized abundant life and what Jesus was saying to the crowd, to this Gospel's original audience, and to all of us is that abundant life with God is not a far off in the future, if you do all the right things promise, but a present reality, right here and right now.

I said earlier that each sign in this Gospel points to something the author wanted his audience to believe about Jesus. In this text, Jesus even kind of scolds the crowd for seeing the sign yet not believing. But, not believing what? The Gospel writer wanted his readers to know, without a doubt, that when someone encounters Jesus, they encounter God. To believe in Jesus as the Bread of Life is primarily to acknowledge the relationship between God and God's people. You see, the bread from heaven was provided for the Israelites whom God loved and never abandoned. In the wilderness God was present, providing for God's people. To believe in Jesus as the bread from heaven, the Bread of Life, is to recognize that relationship. It is to believe in the relationship and what the relationship means, both then and now.

One of the ways we talk about that relationship in our tradition is through communion, which is also heavily rooted in symbolism. My desire any time we use symbols in worship is that I explain what I mean when I talk about them, not

because the way I understand them is the only way to understand them, but because I want to be clear about what I am inviting you to think about and participate in.

In the communion symbols, I invite you to think about God who is always present: in the wilderness, in our greatest joy and our hardest grief, yesterday, today, and tomorrow. I invite you to think about God who provides bread and juice, both products of the earth, which God created, and we use them as reminders of the time Jesus spent in community, around tables with all kinds of people or as the Gospel of John frames it, "the world." And therefore, literally everyone in the world is welcome at this table where we break the bread of life and drink the cup of hope. You are invited. Amen.