

KGL+
Sermon
Trinity Church Boston
Year B Proper
August 25, 2024

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts together always be acceptable in your sight, O God our strength and redeemer. Amen.

As of this week, Church, we can all mark ourselves as Facebook safe from the Bread of Life Year B series of discourses.¹ This is the last week of following the Gospel of John, and next week we turn back to the Gospel of Mark, who in comparison will seem abrupt and nearly rude with his literary brevity. It's been five weeks of digging into the sixth chapter of John's gospel, beginning (if you can recall that far back) with the feeding of the five thousand with those simple loaves and fish, procured by a local child and given to Jesus and his disciples.

If you haven't been to a lectionary-based service in the last five weeks, allow me to fill you in: Jesus feeds the five thousand out of compassion for them from five loaves and two fish.² He then crosses the sea and a bunch of those he fed follows him there. And what happens then is a masterclass in teaching by Jesus:

Jesus says, 'Remember those fish and that bread that we all ate? That was kind of like another miracle, of the manna which God provided those who had escaped from Egypt under Moses. It's not just a party trick, it's a metaphor.'³

The people say, 'Oh yes, we see the connection, it's very meta!'

Then Jesus says, 'So, that miracle bread? That shows God's loyalty and love? I am that bread.'

And the people said, 'Yes, you are!'⁴

And Jesus says, 'So bread is meant to be shared and reminds us not only of God, but of one another, right?'

And the people say, 'We got it, bread is shared AND a metaphor!'

And then Jesus says, 'Okay, keep following me: so bread needs to be consumed to fully engage with it, you know, not as a one-time-thing, but for sustenance for life.'

And the people are all 'EAT THE BREAD! EAT THE BREAD!' (or croissants, per Abi's sermon last week)⁵

¹ <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/are-you-safe-facebooks-safety-check-and-the-future-of-emergency-management/>

² https://www.lectionarypage.net/YearB_RCL/Pentecost/BProp12_RCL.html#gsp1

³ https://www.lectionarypage.net/YearB_RCL/Pentecost/BProp13_RCL.html#gsp1

⁴ https://www.lectionarypage.net/YearB_RCL/Pentecost/BProp14_RCL.html

⁵ https://www.lectionarypage.net/YearB_RCL/Pentecost/BProp15_RCL.html

And Jesus says, ‘Soooo, if I am the bread of life, and the bread of life must be consumed because it’s not just a metaphor for God’s love, because literally here I am standing here with you guys because I am one with God, you need to eat my flesh and drink my blood.’⁶

And then, and this is not the exact translation from the Koine Greek, then there were *crickets*.

And the people probably had many verbalized responses, but the version that the Gospel of John chooses to report is very politic: “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?”

It’s worth pointing out that the people we’re talking about are not simply casual observers of Jesus—they aren’t just dipping into this itinerant rabbi’s one time show. The folks who are following Jesus are actually *following Jesus*—they were the ones who crossed the sea in order to then experience five weeks of the bread metaphor slowly expanded, or as the imagery might suggest, rose.⁷ The ones who are listening aren’t just ‘the crowds’ any longer, nor the authorities who have a pointed agenda for their attendance, but John calls them ‘disciples’-- several times! Even when they get to this point where they are wondering if cannibalism is on the docket for this Jesus.

Metaphorically, it all works on paper—if Jesus is the bread of life, if Jesus is not only co-eternal with God, but *co-existent* and therefore the incarnation of God, then this bread—which is the relationship with God, holiness found in the mundane—isn’t just a metaphor, it needs to be fully consumed. And by consumption of the bread, Jesus means himself—fully, unabashedly, flesh and blood—the incarnation of God standing before them.

Okay, maybe on paper it’s still not great. But then again, the intimacy of relationship with God is explicit in some ways—belief, faith, resurrection—these aren’t based on good thoughts or feelings, but requires a whole body investment. And when we are asked to invest ourselves fully in something—be it situational, emotional or mental—we have to relinquish our investment in other places.⁸ Jesus isn’t just content with metaphor, or positive vibes, Jesus knows that humanity loves the idea of abundance, and will always move towards the ‘more gained with less at stake’ path, when given the choice. Jesus lays down the stakes—he isn’t just a snack. He’s our very sustenance.

Which brings me to the phenomenon of selective hearing.

The 1983 movie ‘The Man with Two Brains’ is a riff on the mad scientist story genre, starring Steve Martin. Steve Martin’s character is a widower who is attracted to another woman, even despite his devotion to the memory of his late wife. In an early scene, Martin stands in front of the portrait of his late wife Rebecca (there are no subtle movie references in this film), and says to it, full of feeling, “Rebecca, if there is anything wrong with my feelings for Dolores, just give me a sign.” In response, her portrait begins to spin, a wind roars around Martin, a wailing ‘nooo’ emits from the room, the wall cracks and splits. The chaos lessens, and after a beat of silence, Martin responds, “Just any kind of sign. I’ll keep on the lookout for it. Meanwhile, I’ll just put you in the closet.”⁹

⁶ https://www.lectionarypage.net/YearB_RCL/Pentecost/BProp16_RCL.html#gsp1

⁷ This is a pun on yeasted bread rising. It did not pan out in the congregational response as the author had hoped...

⁸ There is so much written about this, but as a female brought up in the 80s and 90s, there was absolutely the assumption that one could have it all—it’s disputed convincingly in so many ways, because it makes sense on paper, but we have yet to address the cultural implications of saying ‘no’ or ‘not now’: <https://hbr.org/2012/10/no-you-cant-have-it-all>.

⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mkcKQmr7kRc>. Enjoy 😊

“This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?” In a Gospel chapter replete with metaphor and imagery, this concrete response from Jesus’ disciples is intensely real. What Jesus asks of those who follow him is far from a fad diet, but rather a conversion to a life proclaiming love, hope, justice and mercy. We ask God for signs when we are lost or seeking—no matter how much our theology cognitively may not agree with that kind of personalized epiphany—and yet if the sign isn’t quite to our liking or comfort or taste, or requires too much of us—inviting us to see relinquishment as a holy practice as accumulation¹⁰—we like Martin, keep asking for the sign and then putting the portrait in the closet.

Selective hearing is powerful, as anyone who has tried to have a conversation with a teenager, or one’s parents, or one’s partner, or with anyone who begins a conversation with ‘When two people love each other very much...’ We do it all the time with Jesus. We love the bread. We love to love the bread. We love to think we love the bread. We just forget that bread is more than bread, sometimes. That it is less about miraculous performance, a reward at the end of a well-earned week; and more about intimacy with the divine, and intimacy, as we know, comes with a required, and chosen, cost.

Jesus saying “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them,” cost him followers. When we dig through the deepest aspects of our faith, or what holds value to us, we discover more than anything that to hold something dearly and deeply requires both hands open and ready. When we come to the communion table, and a child or adult is unsure what to do to receive communion, my go-to instruction is ‘put both your hands out like a plate’. While practical in nature, theologically it’s what Jesus asks of us—both hands in, both hands open, ready to partake in the same shared bread that those followers did two thousand years ago.

And the beautiful part of this? The coda, if you will, to the bread of life? Even those who walk away from Jesus in today’s gospel—those who just cannot with the metaphor of flesh and blood and are not ready to ‘dig in’—notice John’s language here for the people: they are still disciples. As they walk away from Jesus, they are still disciples. They, we, are still loved even when the cost seems too great for the return, and we discover that our risk aversion leads us to selectively hear Jesus’ words.

God’s love is made real for us, Church. In Jesus. In shared bread. In one another. Even if we try to put it in the closet. Amen.

¹⁰ “There is the voice you can still summon at will, like your mother’s/ it will always whisper, you can’t have it all,/ but there is this.” I love this poem by Barbara Ras; perhaps you might too: <https://poets.org/poem/you-cant-have-it-all>