

But it's the OLYMPICS!"

11 Pentecost B Aug 8, 2021 Rev. Dr. David Gardner Tweed

Gospel: John 6:35, 41-51

³⁵Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, & whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." ⁴¹Then the Judeans began to complain about him because he said, "I am the bread that came down from heaven." ⁴²They were saying, "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father & mother we know? How can he now say, "I have come down from heaven'?" ⁴³Jesus answered them, "Do not complain among yourselves. ⁴⁴No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me; & I will raise that person up on the last day. ⁴⁵It is written in the prophets, ' & they shall all be taught by God.' Everyone who has heard & learned from the Father comes to me. ⁴⁶Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; this one has seen the Father. ⁴⁷"Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life. ⁴⁸I am the bread of life. ⁴⁹Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, & they died. ⁵⁰This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it & not die. ⁵¹I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; & the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."

Overview - The Greatest Bread

After feeding more than five thousand people in the wilderness, Jesus teaches them regarding the true significance of this remarkable sign. Jesus uses the image of bread to demonstrate that, even compared to all the great things God has done before, God's greatest miracle is in the life, death, & resurrection of Jesus. Jesus, the bread of life, is a greater miracle than the manna God sent in the desert (Exod. 16:14), greater than the bread the angel brought to restore Elijah (1 Kings 19:4-8), greater even than the loaves Jesus had just multiplied to feed a crowd of more than five thousand people (John 6:1-14)! In Jesus, God gives bread for the journey—not only for this life, but also into eternal life. Jesus' message is both outrageous & outrageously comforting: anyone who eats this bread will live forever. The Son of God meets us in this life & gives us real & certain hope for eternal life. Normal bread is amazing in its own right; manna is miraculous. But Jesus Christ is the true bread & the greatest miracle of all.

[John 6:35, 41-51](#)

For John, eternal life, which is promised to all who eat the bread of life, is both manifest in the resurrection at the last day (v. 44) **& is experienced already** (v. 47). This passage is filled with Johannine metaphoric hyperbole: believers will never hunger again; they will never die. John is the only NT author who speaks of eating Christ's flesh. This stark terminology has been interpreted most often as an intense sacramentality. In John 1:14 the word became flesh. Traditional Judaism described the Torah as food for the faithful (v. 45).

Jesus has miraculously fed a large crowd, "about 5,000 in all" (v. 10). But the crowd has misunderstood the food he offers; they have seen it as "bread from heaven" (v. 31) like the manna God gave their ancestors in the wilderness. Now Jesus says that he is both the "bread of life" (v. 35) & the *water of life* (as "hungry" & "thirsty" show). His is sustenance for all time, & beyond, for those who come to him & believe in him. He says, "I am the bread that came down from heaven" (v. 41): that a human claims to be divine offends strict Jewish monotheism & is the cause of complaint, murmuring among the people. (Manna was God's response to the murmuring of their ancestors in the wilderness.) They ask (v. 42): how can one who has human parents have come from heaven? Rather than answer the question, Jesus tells them (v. 44): only those whom God *draws*, calls, can believe in ("come to") him; those who are called will be raised, brought into full union with God, at the end of time. If you had heard & learnt the prophetic books of the scriptures, you would believe in me (v. 45). The way people are "taught by God" is through me, for I have "seen the Father" (v. 46). One who believes has "eternal life" (v. 47). "Manna" (v. 49) was from heaven, but the bread I offer is more: it is "living" (v. 51): this is what "never be hungry ... [nor] thirsty" (v. 35) means. It (or I) offer life "forever" (v. 51). The bread of the Eucharist is "my flesh".

What Does the Text Say?

Jesus makes a series of outrageous claims. After asserting he is "the bread of life," he declares that "whoever comes to me will never be hungry, & whoever believes in me will never be thirsty" (v. 35). To have the assurance of never being hungry in a subsistence agrarian economy, of never being thirsty in an arid land & of never having to face one's own death let alone the deaths of beloved friends & family — any or all of these assertions deserve consideration. Such a literal approach to Jesus' claims is how many understood him, as in, "Sir, give us this bread always" (v. 34). As the passage concludes, Jesus returns to his initial claim, "I am the bread of life" (v. 48). He then reminds "the Jews" (i.e., the religious authorities) of a critical moment in their history:

"Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, & they died" (v. 49). In light of this reality, Jesus tacitly posits the following notion: since the bread that our ancestors ate did not prevent death, this fact alone suggests that an altogether different type of bread is required — bread that will do more than just nourish the flesh, but also will bring eternal, abundant life. This bread is Jesus; he is the bread of heaven, "so that one may eat of it & not die." He is "the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever" (vv. 50-51a).

Clues to insight

1st Clue: *Belief is the key to receiving the benefits of the bread of life.* Eternal life comes from putting faith in Jesus Christ. It's not about the bread. It's about the belief. "What you see is the bread & the chalice; that is what your own eyes report to you. But what your faith obliges you to accept is that the bread is the body of Christ & the chalice the blood of Christ." ...St. Augustine

2nd Clue: *Living bread is not bread at all -- it's a living person.* He does not want the Jews to get stuck on the idea of physical bread, even though they know the amazing story of manna in the wilderness. "Whoever eats of this bread will live forever," promises Jesus; "& the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh" (v. 51). Jesus wants us to believe in him & to take him into ourselves, much as we would eat a piece of bread, digest it & incorporate it into our bodies. Jesus invites us to trust that he is the living bread that has come down from heaven -- bread that is broken in communion, just as Christ's body is broken on the cross.

3rd Clue: *Jesus is all about giving, not taking.* We see him offering his welcome to tax collectors, his healing to lepers, his blessing to children, his forgiveness to sinners & a feast of fish & bread to thousands of hungry people. As his disciples, we're challenged to take the same actions by showing hospitality to the strangers at our doors, supporting medical missions to underserved communities, helping children to feel welcome in worship, offering forgiveness to the people who hurt us & feeding the hungry families who are living all around us.