

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX
8 August 2021

John 6:35, 41-51

Saint Peter says to a man who has just come to the pearly gates, "Here's how it works. You need 100 points to make it into heaven. You tell me all the good things you've done, and I give you a certain number of points for each item." "Okay" the man says, "I attended church every Sunday." Saint Peter said, "That's good, that's worth two points." The man was surprised. He said, "Two points?" Reluctantly he continues, "Well, I gave 10% of all my earnings to the church." Peter was impressed. He said, "Very good, that's worth another 2 points. Did you do anything else?" The man was frustrated. He said, "Two points? Golly! How about this: I started a soup kitchen in my city and worked in a shelter for homeless veterans." Peter was thrilled. He said, "Fantastic, that's certainly worth a point." The man is beginning to be concerned, so he quickly adds, "I was married to the same woman for 50 years and never cheated on her, even in my heart." Peter shouts with joy, "That's wonderful, that's worth three points!" The man feels utterly hopeless. He exclaims, "THREE POINTS!! At this rate the only way I get into heaven is by the grace of God!" Peter smiled and said, "Please, come on in!"

The lectionary gives us five consecutive Sundays about bread, all coming from the sixth chapter of John. When you listen to the words of during these five readings, and you try to place yourself in the shoes of a Palestinian, you can understand the crowd's discomfort. Jesus speaks of being bread, of giving his flesh for the sake of the world, of having come down from heaven so that people may eat of his flesh and drink of his blood. It is almost too much. For the Jews, who have grown up avoiding contact with any blood, as a strict requirement of the law, these words are just a bit too much.

The author C.S. Lewis in his great book *Mere Christianity* puts it this way, "A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic--on the level with a man who says he is a poached egg--or he would be the devil of hell. You must take your choice." Before we discuss in detail these difficult words of Jesus, let us place ourselves in the narrative of Chapter 6.

Deacon Beth Anne preached two great sermons from the beginning of John 6. As you remember, the chapter began with the feeding of the five thousand in Tiberias. After the feeding the people exclaim, "This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world." They attempted to make Jesus king by force (John 6:1-14.) Soon after this, Jesus remains on the mount to pray, and the disciples go back to Capernaum. 4 miles into the journey, the wind is blowing fiercely, Jesus walks on the water and announces, "It is I, do not be afraid" (John 6:16-21). The next day, the crowds that had been with him in Tiberias took boats and came to Capernaum looking for him. Annoyed they ask, "When did you come here?" Jesus begins a long instruction saying, "Very truly, I tell you, you

are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves.” The crowds demand to know “what works must we perform to do the works of God?” Jesus responds, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.” The crowds ask for a sign that Jesus is the one that was sent. They compare Jesus to Moses when they ask for a sign. As Moses gave manna to his people to eat, Jesus must provide a sign. Jesus responds that it wasn’t Moses but God who gave the manna. He adds, “The bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” The Deacon reminded us that Jesus is bread for now, not the past, not in the future, not just in heaven, but now. This is the bread that gives life to the world. The crowds in John respond, “Sir, give us this bread always” (John 6:22-34.)

The passage today begins at verse 35 as Jesus responds to their request by saying, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” Jesus affirms that the will of God is that all who accept his Son and believe in him may have eternal life and be raised up at the last day (V. 40). In a way, what Jesus is saying is that he himself is the bread the crowds are asking for, and he has already been given to them by God. Then John tells us that “The Jews” began to complain about Jesus. The shift here from the “crowds” to the “Jews” is significant. The word used for complaining here is one that most likely means “arguing among themselves” more than it means arguing or fighting with Jesus. Even if some in the “crowds” are willing to believe in Jesus, the truth is that many Jews are conflicted about this Jesus of Nazareth.

There are great similarities between Chapter 6 of John and the Exodus account in the Old Testament. Remember that John sets the feeding of the five thousand around the feast of Passover. Passover celebrates the time of liberation of the Jews from their captivity in Egypt. In a way John is saying: (A) As God sent his prophet Moses to rescue Israel from captivity, God has sent his own Son to rescue us from captivity. (B) In the same way that God gave his people manna to eat in the desert, God gives his son to be the bread of the world. Jesus feeds the 5,000 with physical bread in the same way that he feeds millions today with his sacraments and with the bread of his Word. (C) In the same way that the Israelites grumbled and complained in the desert even after God had given them manna, the Jews of Jesus’ day complain among themselves and grumble about this Jesus. (D) And I believe this is the punchline for John, in the same way that God did not permit that desert generation to enter the Promised Land, God will deprive those who refuse to accept Jesus, the bread of life, the opportunity to enter into eternal glory, which in John it is both a relationship here and now with the living God, as well as the promise of eternal life with him.

At heart, the failure of the wandering people in the desert was a failure of faith. They refused to believe that the God who had liberated them, fed them, and protected them would be with them to the end and would bring them safely to the Promised Land. It is the same with the Jewish people of Jesus day. Even though they have seen the signs, even though they have eaten the bread and seen the healing of sick people, even though

they have been captured by the wisdom of Jesus of Nazareth; they failed to have faith that Jesus might indeed be the one who has come down from heaven, the Messiah. They say to themselves, “Isn’t he the son of Joseph? Don’t we know his family?” At heart, what we see here is a lack of faith and a refusal to believe that God can reveal himself in the seemingly mundane reality of everyday life. They were unwilling to look beyond the familiarity to see God’s divinity among them. Once again, they knew Jesus so well that they took him for granted and resented his claims. Yet, Jesus makes it very clear that those who are drawn to himself by God the Father will receive eternal life. Now, for John, the expression “Eternal Life” is both the promise which awaits all of us in the future, but also a present reality. For John, to have eternal life is to see and to believe in Jesus (vv. 40, 47), to eat and drink sacramentally of the body and blood of Jesus (v. 54), and to listen and learn from Jesus’ words (For more see Stoffregen’s notes on John 6 at <http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/john6x35.htm>.)

My friends, I find it very comforting that John tells us it is God himself who draws us to Christ and who teaches us about Christ. This is the main difference between Christianity and many world religions. Whereas many world religions ask the question the Jews asked of Jesus, “What works must we do to do the works of God?” Christianity’s concern is with God’s works and not our works. Whereas the world religions attempt to answer this question and gain favor from their gods through good behavior, rituals, and even sacrifices, Christianity is not so much about what we can do for God to merit his favor, but rather about our God giving us his favor in good measure and in good time. Christianity is about what God does for us. It is God himself becoming flesh; God himself drawing us to Jesus Christ; God himself feeding us with his word and with the sacramental body and blood of his son; finally, God himself giving us eternal life now through his Holy Spirit, by allowing us to have a proper relationship with his Son, and later when he will give us eternal life in Paradise, when our human race is done.

The good news of our faith is that God is the one who does the drawing in. He draws us into himself every day. All we need to do is open our eyes and see his divine plan revealed in our common everyday life. All we need to do is open our hands and receive the plentiful gifts he gives us every day. The one we wait for is already here and he seeks a relationship with us. This is eternal life, that all of us may come to accept God daily into our lives and that we all may have a proper relationship with his Son, Jesus Christ. My friends, either this Jesus is truly the bread of life, or he is a lunatic as C.S. Lewis stated. I believe that this Jesus is the Savior and Redeemer of the World and I believe that a relationship with him is possible. I welcome all of you to open your eyes and see the many ways in which this Jesus reveals himself to us daily in Scripture and in our daily lives. He is alive and he walks among us. Sometimes he has the face of a woman in distress, a hungry child, or a lonely prisoner. I pray that you will open your eyes, that you may see him, and that you may seek a relationship with him. Amen!