

## John 6: 35-51 From Where?

This is not only our third week looking through the lens of John's gospel, but the third week we have been in this same chapter 6. In a semi-humorous way this chapter could be entitled: "Everything you ever wanted to know about bread" because bread, literally and metaphorically forms the theme for this entire chapter. First we are presented with the bread that nourishes physically as shown in the feeding of the five thousand. This bread provided by Jesus is so abundant that 12 baskets of leftovers are gathered from the scant amount initially present. Next we are told this same crowd has come seeking Jesus. He then begins telling them about the bread that nourishes eternally or spiritually. This bread is also provided by Jesus as shown in his declarative statement "I am the Bread of Life. These are two aspects we have talked about previously. A commentary I read at the beginning of this venture into John issued a complaint which posed the question: "Just how many things can you find to say about bread beyond those two points." The points that God provides abundantly and eternally for those claimed are essential, but obviously John found more to say about the topic. I want to explore these things with you as we continue reading from John's gospel. It should be noted that at this point the conversation Jesus is having has shifted focus. It no longer seems to be with the crowd depicted in the earlier verses. That conversation with those he has nourished who sought him out in Capernaum was a cautiously positive response. They listened to him speak about the Bread of Life and expressed interest in receiving that bread that does not perish. Now our attention is directed toward a subgroup in the crowd which John describes as Jews, Jews who are complaining. We need to consider who this group might be. The gospel of John is historically the last gospel account to be written. In fact all of the gospel accounts were written after the Pauline letters to the early church congregations. In each of them we can detect the schism which occurred as the Christ movement grew. Although Paul and other believers carried the message to the Gentile or pagan members of the various places they visited, the movement was first present among those Jews, like Paul, Peter and the other disciples who recognized Jesus as the promised Messiah. After Jesus' death, the disciples were found in the synagogue praying. By the time John's gospel was written, those of the Jewish tradition who accepted Christ were forced out of the synagogues. So we can detect here and in other places within John as well as in the Pauline letters the split which is described between those in the synagogues who did not accept Jesus as the one promised by God and those who were of the Jewish tradition but were expelled from the synagogues because of their belief in Christ. These people Jesus is now addressing among the crowd are ones complaining about what Jesus is saying. They have correctly made the connection between the man before them and the divine. They understand the claim which Jesus is making that he is the manna from heaven, God descending to live among them. He states he has come down from heaven, not just like the manna, but that he is the true bread which has the power and will grant eternal life. Jesus' claim is that unlike the manna from heaven which fed their ancestors who then died; those who believe in his claim will be granted eternal life. This claim is just not something that those who know Jesus' background can accept. John uses here the same arguments that propelled Jesus' rejection by those in his home town of Nazareth according to the synoptic

gospels. These people have knowledge of Jesus' parents. Jesus is thus declared to be too ordinary to be the bearer of God's living bread, let alone to actually be that bread. Isn't it ironic that Jesus has just stated that all those who hear him have to do to be nourished with the bread that does not perish is to believe in him—in his ability to deliver on that promise? In many ways this argument the doubters make seems logical. Their tradition expected deliverance from enemies and restoration of the Davidic kingdom of Israel. This man standing before them was walking about the countryside teaching in a mostly ordinary manner. No pomp and circumstance; no army about to evict the Romans from the land. The crowd is confused by the juxtaposition of claimed power and visual ordinariness despite the healings and other signs being done by Jesus. Jesus appeared to be just like them living as they did. How could they believe a majestic powerful God would descend and live among them? Sometimes I think we have the same problem. The reality of the sovereign God descending to live among us and literally suffer and die to redeem us is so amazing that we often avoid contemplating the depth of God's pursuit of a relationship with us. The promise somehow seems too good to be true in our world. When something seems that good—abundant and eternal life for the taking—do we settle for what those skeptics did? After all, they had the Law given to them by Moses as guide. Maybe it seemed better to settle for the mundane they knew than to believe this glorious message of love and redemption. The metaphor used in this chapter is bread. The central actor in the entire chapter is God. Bread represents life, abundant life given and sustained by God. Jesus recalls for his listeners their past history with God who rescued them from the Egyptians. Jesus is promising rescue as well—rescue from sin and death. But some reject this opportunity to receive the bread offered. In our situation, perhaps bread is not the best metaphor for us. After all, although we know that bread is equated with nourishment, in our lives it is not the essential nutrient for us that it was for Jesus' audience. In fact, since in our experience obesity is more likely a problem than mal nourishment, we often avoid bread in our diet. We often say no thanks when the basket of bread is passed. We are on a diet so we avoid partaking. The question is, do we also reject that basket of bread which is the bread of life? Do we also find that what we are offered is not what we were expecting and so we pass on taking it? Or perhaps do we realize that if we truly accept the Bread of Life we will be altered in ways we may not anticipate? Do we prefer to make choices that having partaken of the bread of life offered by God we would no longer be free to make? Accepting the bread of life we are then called give up our control over our life. When we place it in Jesus' care we are called to live according to his teachings. And most of us treasure our sense of control—of independence to want to truly do that. Remember the central tenet of this passage is God's desire and power to save us. Note that in verses 44-45, Jesus tells his audience and us that it is the Father drawing us to Jesus. The verb used here is translated as drawn but it can also have a slightly different and more powerful nuance. A dictionary of Greek words gives the meaning to be dragged, forcibly led. And isn't that a more accurate description of God's actions toward us. We don't want to give up control or independence about the choices we make. Yet we do want that abundant life promised. We do have free will—or else the behaviors listed in the Ephesians passage which we are called to give up would not exist. We are offered the manna which came from heaven, but in accepting it we are called to figure out what things are life giving and then live in that manner. Ephesians 4: Verse 30: Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God. We are told to put away falsehoods and all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander together

with malice. These are not compatible with partaking of the Bread of Life. None of those things are life giving. Instead we are told to be kind to one another, tenderhearted, and forgiving of one another as God in Christ has forgiven us. These are the things which nourish. We pray each Sunday that phrase—as a request to forgive debts as ours are forgiven. It is part of that accepting the nourishing bread which comes from heaven. From where does this ability to live this way come? It comes from accepting and partaking of the Bread of Life, the manna which came down from heaven and lives among us today in the promise of Jesus that he would be with us until the end of the age. The Holy Spirit is our guide to the life abundant. Thanks be to God.