

Bread Again

Bread again. Today we read the third of the series of lectionary selections from John's gospel Chapter 6 about bread. So far this chapter of John's gospel has narrated that these people have followed Jesus after they have been fed abundantly from a small quantity of bread and fish. They originally gathered to follow Jesus because they regarded him as a teacher and have witnessed his miracles of healing. Then they followed him seeking to be fed again. They want another meal. In response to this seeking on their part Jesus tells the audience something that they just don't comprehend. He explains that the bread from the previous meal was just a sign of something much better. He speaks of nourishment beyond the physical bread that was provided the day before. He tells them that he has come down from heaven to bring God's bread to them, the message, his father's message, to them about abundant and truly satisfied hunger. When Jesus tells them the bread he can provide is bread that will not perish, that will satisfy them completely and eternally, they know that they want this kind of bread. They want to sign up for this opportunity to never be hungry again by responding, "Sir, give us this bread." But they really don't know what they are asking for at this point. So Jesus continues with this dialogue's metaphor to interpret the sign that they have witnessed. Our gospel reading this morning begins with the same verse that ended the gospel passage last week: Jesus' statement "I am the bread of life, whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." The theme of this metaphor which continues today is again about the eternal satisfaction which can be found through faith in Jesus who is the manna, the bread from heaven which has come down. In fact, the entire sixth chapter of John's gospel except for the brief description of Jesus walking on water is focused on this metaphor about bread and being abundantly nourished and satisfied. It is about Bread which does not perish, which satisfies fully and is being mediated through this man they know as Jesus. When this conversation begins there is the clear reference back to the Exodus story through the comparison to the manna which came down from heaven; that narrative which is such an integral part of their tradition. This group has already made this connection to those other miraculous feedings—the manna from heaven which nourished them in the wilderness journey to the Promised Land. John's gospel also deals more subtly with other issues present now which are also recorded in their scriptures about the journey from Egypt—like their ancestors' confusion over the source of the manna and their complaints against God which are detailed in the Exodus narrative. Their ancestors confused the actions of God with those of the man of God, Moses. Jesus clarifies this for them—the bread from heaven, even in the wilderness, was not from Moses, but "my father". This audience also has much the same difficulty understanding Jesus' identity and message. This first person singular possessive pronoun—not "our" or "your" father, but "my" father connects Jesus with God in an intimate way. The second correction which Jesus places before them is to add the adjective "true" bread that is that the bread being offered is the bread of God, not of Moses and is Jesus himself. God was and God is the source of the bread from heaven and this bread is what gives life to the world. This "I am" statement connects Jesus to that which is needed to sustain life—and it underscores the intimately incarnational claim of this Gospel—the claim that a relationship with Jesus, believing in Jesus

will mean that everything necessary for nourishment will be provided by God. In today's passage we hear the reaction of some in the crowd to this claim. Jesus continues explaining what this statement means by adding, "For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me." Then we read there are some in the crowd who begin to voice doubts and objections. "Then the Jews began to complain about him because he said, 'I am the bread of life that came down from heaven.'" It seems that some in the crowd are familiar with Jesus. They consider him one of their own. That is, they know his parents and his brothers and sisters. They had watched him play and learn his trade as a carpenter, grow up and eventually leave home. In other words, they KNOW him, just like they know all the kids from their old neighborhood. And for this reason, you see---because he is just like them---because he is common---he can't be all that special-- and he certainly can't be the one God sends for redemption. When you consider it the claim Jesus is making is very far removed from what is sought from a divine being. When we are in need or distress, when we are hurt or afraid, we want God to be there, to really there when we need God---be there with strength and miracles to gives us answers and solutions. So when this man they know audaciously claims that he has come down from heaven to do the will of his father---the crowd grumbles against Jesus' words. They have never heard of Yahweh or any of the other gods worshiped in the cultures and nations surrounding them to have anything to do with the everyday---the ordinary---the mundane---the dirty aspects of life. Gods are pictured as being associated with greatness, not grime or ordinary existence. Gods reside up in the clouds, not down here with commoners like them. After all, what God would be willing to suffer the pains and problems, the indecencies and embarrassments of human life as they know it? This claim of self-identification with God who gave Moses the name "I am" from the burning bush seems to mock their understanding of God's majesty and power, and perhaps even worse, it seems to mock their own deep need for a God who transcends the very life which is causing them so much difficulty. They know, first hand, the conditions of human life. They know their own flaws and shortcomings, their own faithlessness and failures. They know of their doubts and fears, too. They know of their betrayals and broken promises, their petty grudges and foolish prejudices. They know all the shame and disappointment and regret of their lives. And so, they reason, if Jesus is a man and really like they are, then they are doomed. For how can someone who is like them save. In fact, how can one who is like them BE saved? Because they can't envision that God so loves that God does come down and becomes like them, they grumble. They are angry. And they are afraid. Their anger comes because they are afraid that in the final analysis they are not really worth saving. It seems to me that in many ways this crowd speaks for us because we often carry the burden of our human failures with us and think that we might not be worth saving. We can doubt the foundational truth of our faith that redemption does not rest with us, but with God. The crowd which has followed Jesus around the Sea of Galilee see a man they have known from his youth---a man just like themselves---and so cannot accept the gift which the incarnation brings. Our faith is an audacious one. Some consider it a foolish one. But we are bold enough, audacious enough to confess that God loves us enough to become incarnate, that is to become carnal, to take on flesh in order to achieve God's will and to bring to the world God's salvation. We believe this because of this very one, Jesus, who was common, ordinary, mortal, like you and me, and yet who was also uncommon, divine, the very Son of God. This is the claim which Jesus makes in today's gospel reading, the claim which offended

some, or maybe all in the crowd who followed him then. This claim is one which still offends any when taken seriously today. For where we expect God to come in might, God comes in weakness; where we look for God to come in power, God comes in vulnerability; and when we seek God in justice and righteousness—which is, after all, what we all expect from God—we find God—or more accurately God finds us—in forgiveness and mercy. This is the claim and promise Jesus makes: that God became incarnate; that is, became carnal, took on flesh, became just like us so that God might save us and all people who come to faith by God's word.

This God who claims us does not despise the ordinary or the common like that crowd feared. Instead God seeks such out in order to achieve God's will that the world be saved. This is the promise we celebrate in our sacraments which use the common elements of bread, juice and water. God does not abandon us. In the sacraments we find God's promise to take hold of us and make us God's own, to remain with us and never let us go. In our society today, physical bread is not the dominant image which is needed for survival as it was in the past and still is in some parts of the world. But the bread offered by Jesus is and always will be the one needed for redemption, so perhaps thinking of bread again is something we need. This reminds us of another verse from John's gospel: John 3: 16-17. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." This extended metaphor of bread from God which sustains life also has a literal component. Any interpretation of Jesus as the bread of life must bear this literal truth—for it is the truth of the incarnation—that Jesus—the true manna from heaven came down for the eternal nourishment of the world. Thanks be to God.