

Not Just Bread Anymore

The gospel passage this morning with a little overlap with last week's passage is the last portion of the sixth chapter of John's gospel. What began with the story of the feeding of the five thousand on the other side of the Sea of Galilee now ends in the synagogue at Capernaum. The story began with the demonstration of God's world view of abundance---the taking of scarce resources which although they can provide nourishment seem inadequate and using them provide so abundantly there are twelve baskets of leftovers to be gathered after all are satisfied. Yet if we leave off the overlapping verses, then we can see that this discourse has moved on from that literal feeding. Bread is not even a topic of this conversation as it continues. The concluding verses of the Bread of Life discourse as it is known, well, it's not really about bread anymore—it's about life . The group around Jesus has also changed. From the five thousand fed, to those who came seeking another free meal, we now have a group that is being taught in the synagogue, a much smaller venue. Verse 60 identifies those there through the question they now are said to be discussing. This question seems to reflect a muttering among those present. "When many of his disciples heard it, they said, 'This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?'" That the discourse was no longer about Jesus giving bread to the hungry was something that it was hard for even those who had been following Jesus around the countryside to understand. Giving life by giving bread to the hungry was an obvious and easy connection for them. But when Jesus began telling them that he was offering something a great deal more significant, it seems to provoke questioning complaints. What Jesus is telling them is that he is giving them is life—eternal life and in some respects, even with the some two thousand years of perspective that we have about this offer, that doesn't mean that this concept is or should be any easier for us than it was for them who first heard it. When it comes to imagining life beyond the literal, beyond our basic needs, beyond survival, well, that's when we usually start getting uncomfortable. We are not sure how to deal with this offer. Jesus' response to this complaining is to ask them, "Does this offend you?" If you look at this verse in the Greek, the translations for offend can read a little differently. A literal translation for the verb that we see in English as "offend" in the infinitive is "to cause to stumble." Jesus thus is asking them "Does this teaching that I am the living bread, the source of life, does this cause you to stumble? In other words is this teaching difficult and hard to accept because you cannot accept who I am? The central question is do the disciples accept and believe Jesus is God's anointed. And the accepting of Jesus as the source of life, of abundant life, of eternal life—that is still the core question that each disciple must answer for themselves. Because what Jesus has been saying, what we have been reading for the past four weeks is actually hard to listen to and hard to understand. It is hard to accept that Jesus gives life to anyone—to everyone based on their understanding of his identity. It is hard to completely trust that Jesus provides the only food which truly nourishes and gives life. That Jesus gives his own self, even his own flesh and blood to sustain us on our life's journey are hard words. They are hard to hear, hard to comprehend, hard to believe and fully trust. No wonder that many of those who have been trailing around in the crowd which has been following Jesus now desert him. It is important to note that in this passage John's gospel no longer is talking about the "crowd" or even about the "Jews" in the crowd as before, but about those still present, those who are "disciples." The

people in today's reading who now desert Jesus are precisely those who had, in fact, believed in Jesus. They are those who had followed him and had given up much to do so. But now, finally, after all their waiting and watching and wondering if he is the anointed one promised, they have grown tired, and they can no longer see clearly what it was about Jesus that attracted them to him in the first place, and so they leave. They no longer see in him the one who is going to reclaim the throne of David for them and restore the kingdom of Israel. Jesus challenges those that are remaining saying that there are some among them who do not believe, and so many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. We have John's comment inserted here that Jesus already knows that he will be betrayed, and this leaving by the "many" is the focus of this passage. This passage is about the rejection of life. In John's gospel betrayal begins here—with the not believing that the abundant life that Jesus offers is real. As disciples we can be ones who betray this offer of our Lord. Our betrayal can happen in a couple of ways as encounter difficult situations. Betrayal is that which causes you to believe that this life is for everyone else but you. Betrayal is anything and everything that makes you think that you aren't someone Jesus could love. Of course God loves the world, but when it comes to you personally, well there are certain demands and stipulations about those who are "true" disciples. You are, after all, not really worthy of a love that, if we are honest, seems rather indiscriminate—God loves the world—the whole world? That seems a bit much to believe. Betrayal is that which suggests that your potential for a relationship leaves a lot to be desired, so much so that rejection and marginalization is simply your lot in life. You don't feel that your life is the life abundant. If we are honest with ourselves there are many things in our lives that don't turn out the way we hope, that leave us feeling abandoned and wondering where God is in the midst of our troubles. At these times when we are looking for God, for some sense that there is a God, we can have such a hard time seeing God that we also are tempted to conclude that the promises we trusted were empty and the faith we once held was misplaced. In today's scene from John's gospel we are given a fairly accurate picture of disbelief, with Jesus surrounded by folks who wanted to believe, who used to believe, who have been trying to believe but have gone through the motions too long and have finally given up. In the aftermath of this betrayal by the "many", there is also a picture of belief, of courage and of faith. For just as John writes that the "many" have been unable to believe and no longer follow Jesus, Jesus turns to the twelve and says, "Do you also wish to go away?" The answer is given by Simon Peter: "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God." The passage for today ends on that high note of confident faith. At this point it is easy to write off those other disciples who left as foolish or faithless unbelievers. It is even easier to imagine Peter and the rest of the twelve as flawless faith giants. Yet as the story continues, and each of the four gospel writers makes clear, this was simply not the case. These twelve disciples were also plagued by doubt and fear, they suffered at times from an overabundance of pride and a lack of courage, and they too, eventually desert Jesus. In the behavior that comes from an overabundance of pride and lack of courage we find another way that betrayal of Jesus' offer comes. There is also the betrayal of Jesus' offer when we look at the world and decide there are others who are not worthy and we judge ourselves worthy. Those twelve disciples were not any smarter, or more faithful, or more courageous, or in short, any better than the rest of Jesus' disciples—then or now—so what is it that sets them apart. The answer to that is found in the first part of Peter's declaration of faith

which is actually another question. “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.” Peter knows where to look. That’s what makes him and the others different—it’s not their brains or their abilities or their status as the chosen or even their faith. They simply know where to look to find God’s presence in their world. As believing Christians we confess that this world simply pulses with the presence and activity of its creator: in nature—in family—in the work we do and the benefits we receive from our relationships with others—in our gathering together as families and as a family of faith—in all these places and more God continues to be both present and active in creating and sustaining the whole creation. Despite these things we also know that at times it can be difficult to see God in these places—when nature turns violent like it did in the hurricane that devastated Hawaii, or when family discord erupts, when all the things we normally count on fail to happen, then we are left to turn to the place where we can seek and find the answers. Betrayal of Jesus’ offer is the rejection of relationship and an unwillingness to receive life beyond measure, an inability to accept that abundant life could be true, a reluctance to envision, to dream, to picture that when God said God loves the world that it actually meant just that—it means the world and you. The betrayal is not being able to enter into that relationship and that world view of abundance. Not wanting to be known, acquiescing to fear. We rationalize, domesticate, or moderate God’s desire for relationship with us and for us to be in relationship with others. We explain away the incarnation as if it was only a temporary moment in God’s time and is not meant for our time. But the offer Jesus made was for all time, for all places and for all people. We, like Simon Peter, have come to believe and know that Jesus is the Holy One of God and offers us abundant life through our belief, not our worthiness. Thanks be to God.