

The Thirteenth Chapter after Pentecost – John 6:56-69 – The Rev. Elizabeth W. Colton – 8.22.2021

On July 25, we began reading through the sixth chapter of the Gospel of John, most often referred to as “The Bread Discourse.” Each week this has unfolded, with a slight diversion last week to observe the Feast of St. Mary. This section of John is often confusing, dense, and repetitive. So, if you find this week’s reading from the gospel confusing, you are in good company, starting with the first listeners. The Fourth Evangelist tells us that they were confused as well.

A lot of us have been vacationing, myself included, so we all might need a brief review, because we have spent an entire month, intensively, on just one important chapter of John’s gospel. Each one of us has probably missed out. So here are the Cliff Notes: first, we read John’s version of the feeding of the Five Thousand. The crowd is amazed at how five small barley loaves and two small fish, fish as small as sardines, feed the huge crowd. In John’s version of the story, Jesus himself distributes the food to the people, emphasizing his identity. “If you know me,” Jesus continually says, “You know the Father.” The crowd is meant to see that God continually provides for humankind. Quite literally, God with them, God among them.

It is no accident that this stupendous miracle has a very strong echo of a previous story we all know well: the feeding of the people of Israel who are wandering in the wilderness after their escape from slavery. God provided manna for them, always enough, and it lasted for forty years. So now Jesus intends his personal, hands-on distribution of the loaves and fishes to illustrate, yet again, that God provides for humankind. In John’s gospel, everything Jesus does points to who God is. On some level, the crowd understands God’s provision, but... they are both dazzled by the miracle, and sure that Jesus is fulfilling an old scripture from Deuteronomy in which God says “The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet.”¹ Could Jesus be this very prophet? When Jesus senses that they want to make him a king, he escapes the crowd and goes to a quiet place.

The disciples head off in a boat, a great storm comes up, and Jesus walks toward them across the water. The next day the crowd finds Jesus at Capernaum and they begin a long dialogue with him. Jesus points out that they have missed the Sign – Sign with a capital S – that he, God with them, has clearly demonstrated God’s abiding love and care for humankind. Rather, they are dazzled by the miracle itself – not what and whom it points to. So they ask for another sign. Jesus, amazed that they don’t understand what has been shown forth in their presence, dialogues with them, and we’d have to say they speak at cross purposes.

Jesus tells him that he is the Bread of Life, he himself, and that it is not physical bread for their bodies for which they should be searching, but the Bread of Life itself, to feed their souls. And so begins a very dense and complex metaphor which Jesus expands with great skill, but which, as noted, we’d have to say was at cross purposes with his listeners. They were listening on a literal level.

Jesus continues working with this complex metaphor in today’s gospel, but the crowd is still fixated on the miracle they witnessed, on the actual, visibly multiplying bread. So when Jesus speaks of eating his body and drinking his blood at the beginning of today’s gospel, it is no wonder that his listeners were not only confused, but disgusted. Since they were hearing on such a realistic level, they could not fail to recall the prohibitions intended for all Jews against the drinking of blood.

¹ Deuteronomy

And for goodness sake, this time Jesus was not sitting on a hillside outdoors teaching the people, he was in the synagogue itself! Couldn't this be blasphemy?

We twenty-first century Christians hear this scripture through the lens of a tradition that has come to see this through the Holy Eucharist: the sharing of bread and wine that encompass the totality of Jesus' self-gift, but those first century followers did not hear it that way. Jesus wants them to understand the metaphor this way: eating and drinking are parallel to seeing and believing.² And believing is more about trusting. Jesus' efforts to reach the people with his most basic and simple message: I am the Bread of Life – this just cannot be heard.

Surely this can resonate with all of us who attempt to live The Christian Life. Belief is like a two sided coin – comprised of both faith and doubt. If we are honest with ourselves, we dare admit that doubt is ever present. And so complete and unquestioning belief, although surely an enviable state, might not be realistic for everyday humans. But trust, that is another matter. We can all trust in God, because God continues to care and provide for us in large and small ways. Two large ways are in today's scripture: the provision of manna in the wilderness and the feeding of five thousand plus, centuries apart. What upsets Jesus is the lack of trust, when God's constant lovingkindness toward humankind has been so lovingly and magnanimously demonstrated *before their very eyes*.

Some of the disciples, we are told, decide it is all too much and go their own way. Perhaps they will be back, perhaps not. But the ones who remain have come to trust Jesus. They have come to understand that he has nurtured their spirits, instructed them in how to live, all the while continuously pointing to God. Everything Jesus does is meant glorify God. And those who remain with him may not understand any better than we do, but they have come to trust. They are trusting, if not yet fully believing, that Jesus is inviting them to a relationship that will lead to eternal life. Once again, the invitation is not to blindly swallow, hook, line and sinker, but to trust. Peter speaks for them all: "We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."³ Belief and knowledge as they appear in the original language, loosely translated, really mean trust.

"Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life,"⁴ says Peter, speaking for them all, all who have not walked away. No, they don't wish to go away, although Jesus gives them the chance. They have come to trust this most amazing Holy One of God. And trust means constancy, hanging in there, not knowing for sure, but completely willing to abide in Jesus. This, in the end, is their gift to us. They are average, everyday people, not learned first century scholars, and they too are more than a little lost in trying to absorb Jesus' complicated metaphor about being the Bread of Life, and by extension, what it means to eat his flesh and drink his blood. It's going to take a lifetime to slowly gain understanding, just as it is for us. The critical issue is that these disciples may not be shining examples of rock solid belief, rather they are shining examples of their willingness to trust Jesus. Where else might they put their trust, when Jesus does, indeed, have the words of eternal life? And so they commit to trust, to the common everyday waxing and waning of faith. They will have life circumstances that cause their faith to wane almost to nothing, as Peter will do when he is asked three times if he knows Jesus. They will have life circumstances that do nurture rock solid faith, like the unexpected appearance of Jesus in an upper room after his death.

² The New Interpreter's Bible: *John*, Gail O'Day p. 608

³ John 6:69

⁴ John 6:68

In short, they will be just like us. They have decided to trust, to believe that there is no other way, to trust that Jesus will become more real and more intelligible as their lives progress, because they know he is the Holy One of God. Trust can live and flourish in the midst of doubt and confusion. Doubt and confusion can wane, understanding can dawn. May it be so for us as it was for those first listeners.