

Lectionary 18 B 2021

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

August 1, 2021

Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15; John 6:24-35

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

In last Sunday's worship, we heard the familiar story of Jesus miraculously feeding the crowd of thousands by the shore of the Sea of Galilee. Last Sunday we remembered that the story of Jesus feeding the crowd is described in each of the four gospels. And last week we considered that the understanding of what we call holy communion or the Lord's Supper or the Eucharist is established in the fourth gospel by this feeding of the thousands and not by the last supper in Jerusalem. I spoke last Sunday of this as John's concurring opinion on the eucharist as the Church reads the sixth chapter of his gospel over a course of summer Sundays.

So we have a well known event in the life of Jesus: the feeding of five thousand men, plus uncounted women and children. Remembered and told in various ways by the four gospel writers. Two of those gospel writers actually add a story of the feeding of the *FOUR* thousand as a separate miracle. Perhaps we will talk about that another Sunday. So we Christians have in our New Testament *SIX* tellings that we can reckon with. And they each vary slightly, with John's telling being the longest and the most complicated. So much so that today's gospel reading, the thing I just read with you, is one of five Sunday gospel readings clipped from that long, sixty-nine verse telling by John. In today's clip, the crowd is misguided and misunderstanding. Which *IS OFTEN* the case in this fourth gospel. Jesus often seems to speak in riddles, and the crowds and even his closest followers are often unable to grasp his meaning. And as chapter six continues, this confused crowd will grow increasingly cantankerous with Jesus and with each other.

Today's clip is itself a connecting point with another Bible story that is itself told in multiple ways. That's the story of manna. Bread from heaven. Provided to the Jews in the wilderness during their 40-year wanderings. Our first reading today is just a snippet of that story from Exodus. Ten verses out of a total of 36 verses in that Exodus chapter about manna. But the story of the manna is not just in the book of Exodus. It's also in the book of Numbers. And it's also in the Psalms, if you were paying very close attention today to our psalm. *God rained down manna from heaven; so mortals ate the bread of angels.* So the manna story was written down in different ways, and remembered in different ways, and told in different ways. Just like the feeding of the thousands. Anyway, I would encourage you to read all of Exodus chapter sixteen. If you're just looking for something spiritually, and you have some time, read the whole context of our first reading: read the whole Exodus chapter sixteen. And read the whole context of our gospel reading: read the whole John chapter six.

There's a word that occurs in our snippet from Exodus: Complain. It's in there three times; it's in there five times if you include the verses that were skipped over this morning. Complain. That word will be in next Sunday's continuation of today's gospel reading. And it's the same word, in the original languages. And it's not used very often in the New Testament. Complain. In the King James translation of the Bible, they used a wonderful word: murmur. But in our modern translation, it's translated as complain. The same ancient word appears in both stories, even though it's not used very often. My point is that our gospel reading today— where Jesus is beginning to talk about the “bread of life”— our gospel reading is profoundly tied to the manna stories of the Old Testament, right down to the complaining of the crowd.

Jesus is comparing himself to the manna. It's a metaphor. “I am the bread of life.” But not just any kind of bread. Manna. Manna came from God. Jesus comes from God. Manna was a gift. Jesus is a gift. Manna materializes daily. Jesus materializes daily. Manna sustained the wanderers on their journey. Jesus sustains us on our journey. This is the comparison. What happened to Moses and the Jews wandering the Sinai Peninsula is what can happen to any of us. We can be sustained by the bread of heaven. The new manna. Who is Jesus.

Some of you know that when we share communion at Dove of Peace, we offer rice wafers alongside of our wheat wafers. That's an option for people with gluten sensitivity. At the 2019 synod assembly in Mesa, Arizona, the worship planners decided to use all rice wafers. So everyone got the same thing, no gluten. The synod's office administrator, Norine, had been sent out to buy rice wafers for about 300 people. And without knowing it, she purchased several packages of wasabi flavored rice wafers. If you don't know what wasabi is, it's a form of Japanese horseradish. And so two or three hundred Lutherans— many of whom would consider tater tot casserole to be a spicy adventure— received the body of Christ flavored with Japanese horseradish.

There are a lot of different kinds of bread that get used for communion. Well beyond the flat wheat wafers that so many Lutherans and Catholics and others grew up with. Tortillas, pita bread, matzo bread. Rye bread, challah bread, King's Hawaiian Bread. If there is bread in the world, chances are it's been used by Christians for communion. But manna was a particular and peculiar bread. Manna bread tasted like wafers made with honey. (You'll find that if you read that whole chapter 16 of Exodus.) Doesn't that sound awesome? I can't think of anything better than honey. Me and Winnie the Pooh. Jesus could have compared himself to any of the world's breads. He could have compared himself to the barley loaves that he had just used to feed the crowds. He could have compared himself to wasabi rice wafers. But he compared himself to manna, which was an everyday miracle. It was from heaven, and it was free for the taking. So it was a miracle. And it was something that you gathered daily. No stocking up the inventory, except once a week right before Saturday, what would become the sabbath day. Strict enforcement of that. So it was a daily chore, like washing the dishes or taking out the trash. It was a miracle, but it was also everyday. It was the everyday gift of God, a free gift, a miracle, which sustained life on the wilderness journey.

Jesus is asserting that he would be bread for us in this way. *Manna*. He would be as close, as intimate, as our daily bread. He would be as necessary as our daily nutrition. He would be the presence of God and the promise of God in our lives. We surely receive Jesus as bread when we receive communion. But I think Jesus also means receiving his teachings. Listening to him. Imitating him in works of mercy and healing. In all these ways, partaking of him. Receiving the bread of life. Manna is daily. Not just on Sundays.

The gospel according to John tells us that Jesus said “I am” in eight different ways. I am the bread of life. I am the true vine. I am the good shepherd. I am the light of the world. I am the door of the sheep. I am the way and the truth and the life. I am the resurrection and the life. Seven metaphors. Plus one more: Simply “I am.” All of this comes from one book of the Bible, the gospel according to John. John chapter six is all about “I am the bread of life,” just like John chapter ten is all about “I am the good shepherd.”

As we make our way through John chapter six, we learn more about this particular image of bread. Life-giving bread. There are a lot of different kinds of bread in the world. I know! I’ve eaten most of them! Often with butter. When Jesus describes himself as the bread of life, he has a particular kind of bread in mind: the manna. The everyday miracle that makes life possible and that helps keep us satisfied in a life that sometimes is like a journey through the wilderness. Amen.