

The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost, Year B, RCL

2 Samuel 18:5-9, 31-33

Ephesians 4:25-5:2

John 6:35, 41-51

Psalm 130

Putting the pieces together.

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St. Barnabas Church, Greenwich

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When our plane touched down late on Friday night at Kennedy Airport, I am thankful to say that the portion of Pardoes returning from our ranch in Idaho rolled smoothly to the back country of Greenwich in good order. Of course a bit of adrenalin kicked in as when we hauled our bags into the parsonage, so we burbled among ourselves for a little while talking about what a terrific time we had just had in the Sawtooth Valley before crashing into our beds. I continued to reflect some more yesterday morning about our enjoyable respite as I sought to connect in earnest with our readings from Holy Scripture.

One particular thought that passed through my mind was about some of the leisure time games that took place not only on this immediate past vacation but other similar times over the years. I fondly recall summers at the Jersey shore and very competitive card games, especially hearts, that occupied time in the evening. The Pardoes have been known to pile onto the Scrabble board as well. I did play some backgammon during the last couple of weeks yet I realized that having a crew of twenty somethings in the house introduced a new leisure time and game dynamic. These young adults had several games that they played with great gusto and, in truth, I can't even tell you the names of them. Somewhere in the comfortable musing about this quality time, I realized that we had not taken on any jigsaw puzzles on this vacation. Now I would not say that jigsaw puzzles are a regular fixture for our household but we are a competitive bunch so they have figured into our family leisure time goings on over the years. I can recall a few occasions

where we were going down the home stretch to complete a jigsaw puzzle and missing pieces really messed things up.

Well my Christian brothers and sisters, I was confronted by a Biblical jigsaw puzzle missing a few pieces when I sat down yesterday morning to consider the foundation for my sermon today. Two Sundays ago, we jumped into our five week long divine diversion in the sixth chapter of John's Gospel with excitement about what I called our "two-fer" Sunday. Two miracles for the price of one. Jesus feeds the five thousand with two fish and five loaves followed immediately by Jesus walking on the storm stirred waters of the Sea of Galilee and calming the waves to reveal himself to the terrified disciples. John chapter 6 verses 1 to 21. Okay we were under way with twenty one pieces of the jigsaw puzzle.

Last Sunday Meg journeyed with you into the rich substance of the Bread from Heaven discourse. John chapter 6 verses 24 to 35. Uh oh. We are missing two pieces of the jigsaw puzzle, verses 22 and 23. This very meaningful Bread from Heaven discourse continues today as we have just heard chapter 6 verse 35 then verses 41 to 51. Okay now the puzzle plot thickens. Why the repeat of verse 35 then a little jump to verse 41? What happened to puzzle pieces 36 to 40? I stand here before you to take on the passage that we have heard together not to wring my hands about the Revised Common Lectionary process. Although many of you know how much I enjoy musing about the Lectionary process.

I completely embrace the echo of verse 35 to get us going today. "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." It is a great way to emphasize the overarching topic of this great Bread from Heaven discourse. Yet we need to focus our attention on how this theme continues to evolve. So let's indeed check in on where we are today. Something is up. The first new verse that we hear sends us a message about a change in the emotional charge of those gathered around Jesus. "Then the Jews began to complain about him because he said, "I am the bread that came down from heaven."

Alright this concept of Jesus "coming down" from heaven, from God, was stated by Jesus in one of the missing jigsaw puzzle pieces, verse 38. What we should be alert about is that the "crowd" that was the beneficiary of the miraculous feeding of the 5,000 and the "crowd" that sought out Jesus in last Sunday's introduction of

the Bread from Heaven discourse has suddenly become a specific group of Jews who are complaining about Jesus. Perhaps, to a degree, we need not be too surprised. If we recall the importance of Jewish religious festivals in John's Gospel, precisely Passover here in chapter 6, we might expect that this rather unique concept of Jesus as "bread that came down from heaven" is going to cause consternation at some point. And today's the day.

Imagine that we were brought up in a household where the religious story that is consistently shared at every Passover festival is the important one about Moses and the Exodus of the people of Israel from Egypt to the Promised Land. From bondage to freedom. The festival involves a meal which celebrates God giving God's people bread that came down from heaven in the middle of the desolate and threatening desert. Along comes Jesus, the Son of God, the new bread that came down from heaven. In the miraculous feeding of the 5,000 the evangelist John begins to conflate the Jewish festival of Passover with the radical new practice of commemorating the life, death and resurrection of Jesus in the Eucharist. Then last week, John writes about how Jesus next needed to try to explain to the "crowd" that it was most definitely not Moses who gave the people of Israel the bread from heaven. It was God who provided the bread from heaven.

It would appear that today, devout Jews among the "crowd" have had a chance to think about what they have heard Jesus say and they put forth their complaint. This would be in character with their previous experience. In the desert, the people of Israel complained before and after they received the bread from heaven. What they are having a hard time reconciling today is the divinity of Jesus. They can only look around at one another and say "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know?" They can only imagine Jesus in human terms. The earthly son of the earthly Joseph and Mary.

To the extent that John conflated the sacred meals of Passover and the Eucharist at the beginning of chapter 6, today he has Jesus tell us that anyone who is willing to hear and learn from God in Jesus Christ will be able to share in the divine gift of eternal life in Jesus who is of God. Which is precisely why we are offered the reference from Isaiah "It is written in the prophets, 'And they shall all be taught by God.'" (Is. 54:13) "Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me." The focus on the people of

Israel is made universal. We actually heard this at the very beginning of John's Gospel. The Word became flesh (1:14) and "the law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. (1:17)

There is one more important piece of the jigsaw puzzle to put in place today. Verse 51. The last verse of the Gospel passage. "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh." Jesus reiterates his being the One from God. Then he emphasizes the importance of our continuing the remembrance of him in the Eucharist while also foreshadowing his crucifixion.

We have done some good work today on this amazing Biblical jigsaw puzzle. I even think that we have dealt reasonably well with the missing pieces of our puzzle as we spend this valuable time with the Bread from Heaven discourse. In closing, there is a particular piece of the puzzle that grabs my attention. We have been invited by Jesus to hear and learn from God so that we may more faithfully come to Jesus Christ. The Jews who complained about him as they wrestled with the reality of "the bread that came down from heaven," were committed to the worship practices that they had known for a long time. We too, comfortable in our lovely and meaningful worship practices, must constantly be at work both as individuals and as this part of the body of Christ that is St. Barnabas Church. Our work is to hear and learn anew from God how we are called to participate in God's mission today in our world.

Amen.