

Proper 14B
John 6:35, 41-51
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Choosing Jesus, the Bread of Life

Jesus is proclaiming a new teaching. He's declared to the crowd, "I am the bread that came down from heaven." And the people are beginning to grumble. How can Jesus claim that he is of divine origin? We know who Jesus is, we know his parents, his very human father and mother. How can he say he came down from heaven?

The literalness of the people in dealing with Jesus is a repeating theme in John's gospel. We saw this sense of literalness in the miracle of the multiplicity, as the disciples try to figure out how to feed the crowds earlier in this 6th chapter of John. And we can find this same concern back in Chapter 3 when Nicodemus, a religious leader, has difficulty in understanding Jesus' words about being born again. And again in Chapter 4 when the Samaritan women at the well tries to comprehend what Jesus means by water that ends all thirst.

This kind of literalness, this inability to see layers of meaning reminds me of how some of us perceive color. I know that sounds like a funny comparison, but stick with me. I've spent the last few years in the mountains of Tennessee and sometimes spending extra time surrounded by God's creation and it's natural beauty, can help you to see things a bit differently.

As children, we first learn about primary colors: red, blue, yellow. We learn how combining colors can create something new, how blue and yellow, can give us green, and over time we begin to see, to notice the full spectrum of color, the wide variety that exists in the world. And for some of us, that's as far as we go, we see what we need to see, and it's enough. But others may begin to notice the subtleties of color, the nuances of color ranges, those undertones that create a sense of warmth or cool. The surprise of discovering how deeply vibrant, almost jarring, some colors can be, or perhaps how some shades can be so subtle that we only notice their depths, their richness, in the softer, filtered light of an overcast day, or early, in light of the dawn. There can be so much more to perceive than what we first see, when we take the time to open our minds and open our hearts to see colors more clearly, more distinctly.

The complaining crowd is using their knowledge and experience, to understand Jesus' words, but they can't see the truth, cannot hear his words in a broader, more spiritual sense. They can only see and hear with a kind of literalness, so they don't understand. Nor does Jesus give the crowd a straight answer to their question about his origin. Instead he explains God's purpose, explains God's initiative. Only those who listen, those who truly hear God, are drawn to Jesus. Whoever believes in Jesus and has faith in him can have eternal life. It is God's initiative that makes this faith possible. And we are given a choice: we can hear and learn, we can see and believe . . . or not.

Seeing and believing is at the heart of the faith expressed by John's gospel. To see rightly is to believe, to have the willingness to see more, the openness to take the time to discover the nuances and the layers . . . to not be stuck only seeing red, yellow, or blue. Those who questioned Jesus understood some of what he taught. After all, they were well versed in the Passover traditions. They knew all about their ancestors escape from Egypt, their time following Moses in the desert, and the miracle of the manna, the food sent daily to satisfy the people's hunger. But they didn't understand that Jesus' reference to heavenly food was about more than physical hunger. And they were not yet open to discovering the source of their own true hunger, their own need for the Living Bread who could lead them to new life.

What is our deepest hunger, our most heartfelt desire? What feeds us, bringing a lasting sense of peace? What is it that makes us feel whole? The world has answers for these questions and it's a pillar of our consumer culture. If we buy these clothes, have this car, and live in that neighborhood, all our desires will be fulfilled. We only need to acquire the right things, have the right job, hang out with the right people, and that ideal life awaits us. Then we'll be happy. When we have all the right stuff, all our desires met, then we will be complete.

But it's a lie. It's all a sham. For none of these things is the food that lasts. And many of us, at some point in time, learn this, perhaps the hard way. The dream job that we worked so hard to achieve, but seems to suck the life out of us, leaving us empty. Or the things we had to have, regardless of the cost, only to find they really didn't make a difference. Or striving tirelessly to achieve a goal, sacrificing everything to meet that objective, only to find out that once you made it, once you had arrived, it wasn't all you expected. Laboring for the food that perishes cannot bring us peace. It cannot fill us, for its nourishment doesn't last. What is real, is that we are each made with a God-sized hunger inside us, a desire that can only be satisfied by the Living Bread.

We can make the choice to recognize our need for Jesus. We can receive the Word and Sacrament that nourishes us, that guides us towards a deeper understanding of life in him. Our Savior welcomes us into an ever more intimate relationship, welcomes us to grow into the mystery that is our Living God, for he is the True Bread, the way to eternal life.

Today at the 8:30 service, we were blessed to stand together with those who have made the choice to follow Jesus, and we will welcomed Ally, the precious daughter of Kenton and Meagan Tarver, into the Body of Christ through the waters of baptism. With her parents and godmother, we will all made commitments to do everything in our power as a community of faith to support Ally in her new life in Christ. As a baptized member of Christ's holy Church, Ally will be joining us at the Table in a new way, to be nourished and strengthened with the Bread of Life, and begin her journey, in community, towards a lifelong relationship with the Living God.

God so loves us. God reaches out to us, encourages us with this freely given gift of Word and Sacrament. We are all welcomed through grace to participate in the banquet. Be filled and satisfied though the True Bread. Turn away from the food that perishes, the world's ideas of what we need, and instead choose the Bread of Life that opens our eyes to faith, that opens our hearts to the Spirit of truth. Our hope for the lifelong nourishment that leads us to eternal life is here with us now and, will be with us always, in our ever-present Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.