

John 6:35, 41-51 “Heavenly Food” Rev. Janet Chapman 8/11/2024

I read a story meant for all the cat lovers in the room. It seems that a beloved cat died and ended up in heaven. God greeted him and said, “You’ve been a very good cat, a true friend to your owner. Is there anything I can do to make your stay here more enjoyable?” The cat replied, “I belonged to a very poor family and had to sleep on the hard floor every night. I’d love to have a soft bed.” God smiled and gave the cat a large fluffy pillow. A few days later, a family of mice arrived in heaven. God greeted them and asked if there was anything God could do to make their stay more enjoyable. One of the mice said, “We lived a hard life on the farm, always on the run from the farmer and his dog. Our feet are very tired. Could you give us some skates so we won’t have to walk or run everywhere?” God smiled and gave the family of mice several tiny pairs of skates. A few days went by, and God came back to check up on the cat. “How are you doing?” God asked. The cat replied, “Everything is wonderful. I love my new soft bed. And those meals on wheels you’ve been sending by are just heavenly.”

Chapter 6 from the Gospel of John begins with Jesus miraculously feeding the 5000 and the people responding with overwhelming joy. The chapter ends with the disciples asking how anyone can understand Jesus’ teachings, let alone, follow them? It starts with a chorus of happy days are here again! The Messiah has come, he’ll turn our nickels into dimes, make our gardens grow, find beautiful wives for our sons, and destroy the Romans! After eating their fill of fishes and loaves, the 5000 want more – more bread, more miracles, more of what Jesus can provide them. We understand that - give us a little and we want the whole enchilada. In some ways, they are right to ask for more. I learned early on that when we went to church on Sundays, we went to feast on the bread and juice, the presence of Christ in our midst as well as to feast on the Word of God. If we went away hungry, it was our own dang fault. Nowadays, it is not as simple as that. Far too many powers are at work to keep people away, whether it be Christian nationalism, oppression, bigotry, or poverty to name a few. These things work against our understanding of what it means to feast at the Table of God. There are so many who still struggle to even find a place at the Table, whether it is

because of being excluded or because of the illusion that there isn't enough for everybody. In our society of abundance, far too many of our brothers and sisters live without, but in God's design, no one should go hungry, spiritually or physically. Gandhi once said, "To the millions who have to go without 2 meals a day, the only acceptable form in which God dare appear is food." Like in Jesus' day, we don't yet understand what kind of metaphorical and symbolic food Jesus gives us, what the gift of heavenly food truly involves, and what our responsibilities are in receiving it.

So Jesus shifts the conversation from bread to Bread with a capital "B" – as in, "You shall not live on bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God." The people stop their rejoicing and question what's up with Jesus; why is he suddenly talking like this? Jesus appears to turn on them. Instead of bread, as in the Word of God, Jesus explains that "the bread I give for the life of the world is my body." Now he's begun to talk about suffering and dying, so everybody runs for the exits. By the time we reach the end of chapter 6, we have gone from thousands of people who have gathered to listen to Jesus' teachings to a handful of followers left. Jesus asked the few, "Will you also go away?" They rather pitifully respond, "Where would we go?" as if there is nowhere else. They are struggling to understand the difficult words Jesus has leveled at them. Although others leave, they decide to stay... without knowing why, they decide to stick around for more.

Alyce McKenzie tells of attending a screenwriter's conference in Taos, New Mexico where one of the topics was movie cliches which should be avoided in movie scripts. It turns out the most overworked cliché in recent decades is "You just don't get it, do you?" Dr. Evil says it in an Austin Powers movie; Martin Lawrence delivers the line in Big Momma's House; we hear it on the lips of Stanley Tucci in The Devil Wears Prada as well as Marisa Tomei in My Cousin Vinny. Time doesn't allow for the entire list, but it is long. However, it doesn't include Jesus, although maybe it should. Jesus speaks to "the Jews" on more than one occasion but avoids the phrase, "You just don't get it, do you?" The phrase "the Jews" isn't indicative of all Jews of Jesus' day, and certainly not to Jews today. It refers to a limited group who opposed Jesus and its

reference probably grew out of a conflict John's community was having with local synagogues. But there were thousands from various groups who just weren't understanding. In the first 6 chapters, Jesus reveals great patience with all kinds of people who don't get what Jesus is teaching. One of John's themes is that Jesus is of the light, is from another realm, and is carrying a message of heavenly and eternal significance. He has come to our world, where there is darkness that has almost overcome the light, and where we are focused on that which is physical and fleeting. A theme of non-recognition and rejection runs throughout this Gospel, beginning with the prologue which says, "He was in the world, and the world came into being through him, yet the world didn't know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people didn't accept him."

The people who encounter Jesus are needy and troubled, displaying various degrees of incomprehension. To all of them, Jesus could have quoted the movie cliché, "You just don't get it do you?" Jesus could have asked it of Nicodemus in chapter 3: "No, I'm not talking about being born again from your mother's womb – I'm talking about spiritual rebirth." You just don't get it, do you? He could have said it to the woman at the well in chapter 5: "No, I'm not talking about a drink of water from this deep, dark well. I'm talking about my presence that fills a thirst no earthly water can quench." You just don't get it, do you? And to the crowd today: "No, I'm not talking about bread that wears off in a couple of hours and leaves you hungry again. I'm talking about the Bread from Heaven that God has sent into your world to feed you so that you may have eternal life. God sent manna, God sent me, God sends heavenly food to give life to the world. The fact that you know where I grew up, that you know my origins, you think invalidates my claims, but in reality, it is the whole point. God has come into your here and now through me."

What does it mean for John and for us to share the metaphor that Christ is our heavenly food, that Christ is the Bread of Life? It means nothing if we tell a mother and her starving children that Christ will be their food, and then walk away in a self-satisfied way. But it means everything if we share our bread with them, if we spend

time in support and advocacy on their behalf, if we grab a few school supplies for the kids, if we pick our garden and give the food to Francis Court, if we get to know the microshelter residents and walk beside them in starting their new lives. Monica Hellwig suggests that to accept the bread of communion is to accept to be bread and sustenance for the poor of the world. You are what you eat, after all. To eat this bread is to be that bread for others, to serve in Christ's place for those who need him. Carl Henry says that it is Christ who turns life right side up and heaven outside in. Thus, it is Christ who brings heaven into our midst here and now. Here and now, we are offered heavenly food that we might share heaven with those around us. Jesus tells "the Jews" "Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness and they died. God now offers us the bread that results in eternal life." We can only be nourished if we accept the bread that is offered. These are difficult words, no doubt. But the question before us today is will the complexity of these words prevent us from opening our minds and hearts to God's presence, to the promises of God which have been revealed through Jesus' life and mission?

Alyce McKenzie reminds us that when someone in a movie says to someone else "You just don't get it, do you?" it is either the beginning of an argument or the end of a relationship. Maybe that is why Jesus never says it in John chapter 6. He is interested in neither. What he is interested in, with every person and group he encounters in the Gospel of John, is initiating a dialogue that can lead to a faith which is the beginning of a relationship. He doesn't want to start an argument or end a relationship. He just wants us to get it...and with every taste of heavenly food, we find a reason to stick around for more.