***“The Bread of Life***” by S. Finlan, at The First Church, August 8, 2021

[**Ephesians 4:26–5:1**](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=211)

26Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, 27and do not make room for the devil. 28Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labor and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy. 29Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. 30And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. 31Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, 32and be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. 1Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children.

[**John 6:41–48**](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=211)

41 Then the Jews began to complain about him because he said, “I am the bread that came down from heaven.” 42They were saying, “Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, ‘I have come down from heaven’?” 43Jesus answered them, “Do not complain among yourselves. 44No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me; and I will raise that person up on the last day. 45It is written in the prophets, ‘And they shall all be taught by God.’ Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me. 46Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father. 47Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life. 48I am the bread of life.”

Who doesn’t have anger from time to time? Such as when someone unfairly puts you down or implies you’re stupid? It grates on you, doesn’t it? Ephesians has one of the most unusual and interesting statements about anger. “Do not let the sun go down on your anger” probably means “resolve your anger before you go to bed.” In other words, deal with the problem right away, and don’t let it fester overnight. This is linked to the advice to “be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another” (4:32). But it also is intended for one’s own good, since holding onto anger is toxic. Dealing peacefully with the problem is recommended, for everyone’s sake. Who wouldn’t want to put away all bitterness and wrangling (4:31), anyway? Then comes the brief and powerful advice “Be imitators of God, as beloved children” (5:1). The Greek verb is *mimētai*, related to our word “mimic.” So it really does mean to imitate or even mimic God. God is forgiving and chooses good attitudes rather than toxic ones, so we should be forgiving and choose good attitudes, too. As children imitate their parents, it is natural that we should imitate God. Do that, rather than grieving the Holy Spirit, which Ephesians links with evil and ungracious talk.

In the gospel, we once again see a case where local folks are complaining about Jesus, partly because they know who he is and where he comes from. How can *he* be anything special? Jesus responds by making an interesting spiritual point. No one comes to him unless they are first *drawn* by the Father (John 6:44), which probably refers to an inward, spiritual drawing. He follows it with an important line from Isaiah: “They shall all be taught by God” (Isa 54:13; John 6:45). And again Jesus says “everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me” (6:45). Jesus seems to be saying that Isaiah’s promise is being fulfilled in front of their eyes.

People are being drawn to God, and, if they are sincere, they are also drawn to Jesus. People, if they are honest and spiritually healthy, will be drawn to God. Stated otherwise, they “hunger and thirst for righteousness” (Matt 5:6). People reach up to God, and God reaches down to us. God sets out to fill the hungry. God works on them inwardly, and alerts them to the drawing power of the Son and the Spirit.

Being taught by God may refer to the unconscious spiritual hunger that honest people have, and which can grow unconsciously. As Jesus said in a parable in Mark 4, “the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how” (4:27). Especially in its early stages, spiritual growth is unconscious. But the person who has allowed that to happen gradually becomes conscious of hungering for God, and will eventually be drawn to Jesus, who is the bread of life, who can satiate that burning hunger. These are attractions that come naturally. Joy builds upon joy, as we expand and grow in love. It is natural to be drawn to one’s spiritual parents. God is the over-parent, and Jesus is the immediate parent, spiritually, of all humanity.

Thus, really, all people should be drawn to Jesus. But some people have taken up bad habits, like gossip. The locals were gossiping and complaining about Jesus claiming to be something great. There are other bad habits that people take up, like cruelty, fear of change, and placing their loyalty in groups that are organized for earthly power. Do not seek temporary goals; seek spiritual citadels that are eternal and unassailable. Jesus said of the Pharisees that they “loved human glory more than the glory that comes from God” (John 12:43). Loving human glory means loving prestige and power. And what happens to these when you leave this world? They become as nothing. You can’t take them with you. Craving power is one of the bad habits that blocks the inward yearnings of the Spirit.

Yearning is part of the underlying theme this week. Do you yearn for God’s sustenance, or do you yearn for worldly things, for popularity and acknowledgment? In reality, we may want a little bit of both. We want to see more kindness and goodness among people, but also to see ourselves get a little bit of credit for the good we do. We should be wary of this; it is a tricky way of loving human glory. William Penn said “Avoid popularity; it has many snares and no real benefits.” In a dishonest world, it is often inevitable that the honest person may become unpopular, and we may have to accept it, at least for a period of time.

The New York police officer Frank Serpico refused to accept bribes being paid to cops by criminals. His refusal and his trying to alert his supervisors to the corruption made him very unpopular. Nothing was done about his reports of bribery. He contributed to a newspaper report on corruption. Eventually his fellows set him up to get shot during an arrest! He survived, and later testified as a witness to a commission investigating corruption, which led to widespread reforms in the police department. He chose truth and justice over popularity. When asked why he did it, he said he had to, otherwise “who would I be when I listened to a piece of music?” (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frank\_Serpico) He was inspired by his grandfather (who had been a crime victim) and his uncle (a respected policeman in Italy). In the movie that was made about him, the Serpico character says that he remembered, as a boy, looking up to cops with respect. They represented the law. He yearned for that.

This is someone who chose right over might, genuine worth over mere popularity. This contrasts with the crowd asking “Who is this? We know him.” Well, maybe wait and watch, and you’ll learn something. Maybe he really has a right to say “I am the bread that came down from heaven.” Cannot God send a prophet, or a savior? Their own Scriptures said “They shall all be taught by God.” Maybe wait and see if his teaching seems God-given.

Those whose hearts and minds were more open, were eventually given enough reason to believe, and Jesus promised “Whoever believes has eternal life” (6:47). Even Roman centurions, on two different occasions, recognized the spiritual authority of Jesus (Luke 7:6–10; Mark 15:39). They had seen enough evidence to be convinced, and on one of those two occasions there was no miracle, only Jesus’ noble and forgiving behavior while on the cross. Maybe those centurions yearned for true dignity and courage, and they saw it in Jesus.

Jesus is the bread of life, the source of true human dignity, the one who asked people to think of God as their own spiritual father, and themselves as grateful children. Jesus can meet the yearning of the human heart, and he shows the face, the heart, of God. Jesus reveals the heart of God.