



BIBLE STUDY for the ELEVENTH SUNDAY



after PENTECOST

Focus text: John 6: 24 - 35

In today's text, John begins to unpack the meaning of last week's text and the feeding of the multitude.

Verse 35 may seem a strange place for the lectionary to end this reading, since Jesus' words continue without interruption in verse 36. However, verse 35 is a (perhaps *the*) crucial statement in this portion of John 6 and is a fitting word to have as the final statement in today's reading, because it makes the central claim of this long discussion about bread: Jesus himself is the gift from God that gives life.

Asking the right question is vital for getting to the heart of the matter. A single, well-targeted question from a teacher or a student can open up minds and hearts to new possibilities and lead to deeper understanding. The crowd's opening question in this text is not a promising beginning. After we readers witness the theophany on the sea, the question of "when did you come here?" obviously doesn't matter. Clearly the crowds have "missed the boat," or in more Johannine language, they have failed to grasp the glory of what has happened. Their search is not motivated by seeing the sign, but by filling their bellies (verse 26).

As so often happens in John, Jesus refuses to answer the question which they have asked, but instead redirects the conversation to more important issues. Because they have focused on the wrong "bread," Jesus redirects them toward the bread which "endures." The word translated "endures" (*meno*) in verse 27 is a word which takes on profound meaning as it is used throughout the fourth Gospel, especially to describe the relationship between Jesus and the believer. In the end, this "enduring" or "abiding" will mean nothing less than the Father and the Son dwelling with the believers through the Paraclete (14:23; see also 6:56). The bread which "endures" to eternal life is this relationship which has been made possible by the incarnation of the Son. In fact, the bread which endures is the Son himself, whom the Father gives for the world.

The crowds fail to hear this wonderful gift, and instead focus on Jesus' words in verse 27 about "work". Their question, again, is misguided. They are focused on what they could or should or must do, rather than on what God is doing right in front of them. How often do we, as preachers and congregations and denominations, forget that the gospel is the declaration of what God does, and instead act as though all of reality centers on, and is determined by, what we are doing?

Rather than presenting them with a list of "works" to do, Jesus speaks in verse 29 about a single "work of God." That phrase presents a wonderfully, theologically provocative ambiguity. Is the "work of God" that which God desires but we must accomplish (as implied by their question), or is the "work of God" that which *God* accomplishes, "the work which God does?" Later in John 6, we hear that no one can come to Jesus unless the Father draws them (verse 44). The "bread of God" is that which the Father must (and does) give (verse 33). There is holy mystery here about faith. The depth of the gospel is not measured when we contrast our own working with our own believing. It is closer to the heart of the matter when we hear our own efforts, whether belief or some other activity, compared to what God has lovingly accomplished in the incarnation of the Son. The "work of God" is belief, which is made possible only by giving the Son, the bread from Heaven. Faith is always the gracious and surprising accomplishment of God.

In response, the people continue to indicate their own misunderstanding of what is happening in front of their eyes. As evidence that they have not truly seen the sign that Jesus did in feeding the multitude, they now ask for a sign from him (verse 30). They apparently want a sign from the “old days” repeated. They remember the story of Moses and the manna, and seem to be requesting something like that. They are looking to the past, failing to see that the Father is doing something astonishingly new right in front of them. In verse 32, Jesus exegetes the Exodus story (or Psalm 78:23-25, which the crowd seems to paraphrase in verse 31), but turns the point of that story to the activity of the Father here and now. The true giver is not Moses, but the Father; the true giving was not in the past, but in the present; the true bread was not the manna, but is the bread of God that has now come down from Heaven in the person of Jesus.

Like the Samaritan woman at the well in chapter 4, the people respond with a request that indicates their lack of understanding. Just as the Samaritan woman thought that Jesus had been speaking to her about physical water and thirst, so too the crowds respond as though Jesus has been offering physical bread that will forever fill their stomachs. In a sense, the crowds say the right words: “Lord, give us” (verse 34), but with the wrong understanding. To have properly heard Jesus’ words would have prompted faith, not a fixation on bread. They have wrongly associated Jesus with Moses, rather than associating Jesus with the bread from Heaven.

In the final verse of this text, Jesus makes one more attempt to clear their eyes and ears: “I am the bread of life.” In the discussion with Nicodemus in John 3, Jesus pointed to a birth beyond birth. In chapter 4 and the conversation with the woman at the well, he pointed to water beyond water. Now Jesus points to bread beyond bread, to that gift from God which not only comes to the world through Jesus, but is in fact Jesus himself.

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