

Lectionary 19B 2018, John 6:35, 41-51, August 12, 2018, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Lancaster, PA, Kurt S. Strause

We are now three weeks into what those of us who are preachers call “The Bread of Life” passages. Jesus declares, “I am the bread of life,” using an image readily available to everyone who hears. Though bread is instantly recognizable, the connection to Jesus is not. So, when Jesus miraculously feeds 5000 people with five loaves of bread and two fish the people immediately want to make him a king. Jesus then goes on to teach them not to work for a bread that perishes to which they respond by telling him how God fed their ancestors in the wilderness with manna from heaven. They essentially challenge Jesus by saying, “So, you think you can do a better job than God?” In today’s passage it seems that it’s more than mere confusion and misunderstanding, but rather a kind of ‘know-it-all’ response. Jesus says he is the bread of life come down from heaven and those who come to him will never be hungry. Right away they start complaining how they know his father Joseph and his mother and how is it that he can come down from heaven?

Clearly there’s a problem. Jesus is teaching these folks about the ways of God. But he’s not being simplistic. He’s teaching them about the Father. The Father is the one who gives the true and life-giving bread, a bread which gives life to the world. Jesus is going deeper and deeper here. He’s not just skimming the surface about God. We’re moving into the very heart of the mystery of God. Jesus is drawing us more closely, more intimately, into the ways of the Father. He’s doing so by also pointing to himself as the Son of the Father. He is the one the Father gives as the very bread of life itself. Jesus is the one who has come down from heaven, he says, doing the will of the Father, the one who will raise us up on the last day to live with God.

The people listening to Jesus seem to know everything already. They already know him. They know who he is, and they know where he’s from. He’s the son of Joseph. He’s the carpenter’s son. We already know his father and his mother. He was born here, just like the rest of us. John tells us they were saying these things in a complaining sort of manner. I like to think of their response as knowing it all already. They can’t learn anything more. They’ve already had their mind made up. What they need to know they already learned in sixth grade Sunday School, in confirmation class, from the preacher on television or the radio.

To a certain extent we’re all like this. We all have a bit of the know-it-all in us, whether we want to admit it or not. We’ve got our opinions about God. What God is like. What God is capable of doing. And what God is not capable of doing. We know we need God in our lives, but we also know we need to rely on ourselves and our own initiative and ingenuity. We know we’ve got to decide for ourselves if we’re going to be followers of God.

See, I think being something of a know-it-all when it comes to God is just another way we stay in charge. We’re pretty good at telling God what we want, what we think he should do for us, what he needs to do to make this a better world, keep our children safe and healthy, how to run the country, bring about justice or prosperity or a good harvest or full employment. Yes, I believe we’re real good at telling God what we want and need.

This is just another way of describing what is really at the fundamental flaw of the human heart. God has created us to be in a deeply loving relationship with himself, a relationship based on God being God and we living as his thankful creation. But we’re the ones who are always trying to turn things around. We want to tell God what we think we need. But God is there trying to tell us and show us and give us what we need, saying things like, “I am the bread of heaven

that gives life to the world.” But we keep turning it around and second guessing and trying to be in charge and control.

Jesus comes to reveal to us, again, the will of the Father. Listen again to what Jesus tells us, “No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me.” Listen again. “No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me.” We don’t come to God, unless drawn there first. We don’t decide for God, unless God has already made a decision for us. We don’t tell. We receive. God is the know-it-all, because God is God and we are not.

The famous British writer C. S. Lewis, who wrote the “Chronicles of Narnia” series of books, was once interviewed by an American Christian journalist who was writing about well-known people who had converted to Christianity during adult life. Lewis was such a person. He was not raised a Christian but who had become one later in his life. The theme of the journalist’s work was “decision.” The journalist wanted to get Lewis to say how he had “made his decision.” Unfortunately for the journalist, Lewis refused to put it in those terms. He hadn’t “made a decision,” he said. Lewis described his experience as God closing in on him and he couldn’t escape, though at the time he had badly wanted to. The closest C.S. Lewis would get to using the language the reporter was interested in was to say, “I was decided upon.” In his autobiography, Surprised by Joy, he describes it in even better, “(God’s) compulsion is our liberation.” (*told by Tom Wright, in John, page 82*).

I hope you hear this word as a word of grace and gift. Not that the word of grace is always an easy word to hear. Those whom Jesus met at this time always seemed to keep throwing back at him objections and obstacles to his love. But Jesus is persistent, because love itself is persistent. Though we might find ways to object and stay in control, he is there gently, lovingly, persistently, showing us the love of the Father for all.

Jesus is the Father’s revealing to the world his compassionate, persistent love for everyone. All people are drawn towards God by the loving will of the Father through the life of the Son. There is no one to be left out, no one to be left behind, everyone is capable of hearing and receiving this loving, gentle attraction of love. Here, together, as we gather to worship and listen and sing and praise we partake of the one who gives his very life for the sake of this world the Father so deeply loves. Amen.