

“Taste and See That the Lord Is Good”

1 Kings 19:4-8 • Psalm 34:1-8 • Ephesians 4:25—5:2 • John 6:35, 41-51

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For the third week in a row, we’re going to talk about food. There is a very long sequence in the sixth chapter of the Gospel of John that is pretty much all about food. It begins with the feeding of the five thousand people with five loaves of bread and two fish. That leads into a dialogue the following day in which Jesus talks about how he is the true bread that comes down from heaven. That whole long sequence is broken up into five sections in our lectionary readings, so today we are at the midway point.

Today’s Gospel reading repeats verse 35, which lays out the theme: “Jesus said to them, ‘I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.’” That is the fundamental message here. Our true, abiding spiritual sustenance is in *Jesus*. But the audience that Jesus was speaking to does not seem to understand: “Then the Jews began to complain about him because he said, ‘I am the bread that came down from heaven.’” Now it’s important to clarify that when the Gospel says “the Jews,” what it means are *Jesus’s opponents and detractors*. Jesus was a Jew; most of his followers were Jews; *they* weren’t the ones complaining and misunderstanding. *Some* of the Jews, but certainly not all of them, were not getting it. Don’t make the mistake of thinking that we’ve got “Christians” on one side and “Jews” on the other. The word “Christian” didn’t exist yet. This was, for the most part, a debate *within Judaism* about who Jesus was and what he was teaching.

The detractors think they know where Jesus came from: “They 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?”’” They are thinking in literal terms; they are looking at the flesh-and-blood body of Jesus and thinking *he’s just a man*. He’s got a mom and dad, just like we do. He was born, just like we were. He grew up, just like we did. He didn’t just suddenly arrive here from heaven. He didn’t come from God.

They’re wrong, of course. Well, not entirely. He *is* a man. He *does* have a mom. He *was* born here on earth. He *did* grow up. But he *also* suddenly arrived here from heaven. He *did* come from God.

Jesus is not at all surprised that they don’t get it. “Jesus answered them, ‘Do not complain among yourselves. No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me, and I will raise that person up on the last day.’” Notice his wording. “No one can come to me *unless drawn by the Father who sent me*.” This is *huge*. What he is saying is that *some* people are drawn to Jesus *by God*. But God doesn’t draw *everybody*. You all have been drawn to Jesus; you’re sitting here, after all, on a Sunday morning, choosing *voluntarily* to be in a Christian service of worship. And you probably all know some people who *haven’t* been drawn to Jesus. At least, not yet. Some of them might come around in this life. Some of them might not. *Jesus is okay with the reality that not everybody is instantly drawn to him.*

He understands that this is part of how it works. If he didn't have detractors, if he didn't have opponents, he wouldn't end up crucified on a cross – and *then* where would we all be?

Jesus continues: “It is written in the prophets, ‘And they shall all be taught by God.’” That’s a quote from Isaiah; it’s part of a very hope-filled prophecy: “I will make your pinnacles of rubies, your gates of jewels, and all your wall of precious stones. All your children shall be taught by the LORD, and great shall be the prosperity of your children. In righteousness you shall be established; you shall be far from oppression; indeed, you shall not fear; and from terror; indeed, it shall not come near you.” This is part of God’s great restoration. *Everyone* gets an opportunity to hear the good news of the Gospel. Missionaries have spanned the globe and translated the New Testament into more than 1600 different languages, with one goal in mind: *to spread the good news about Jesus far and wide*. Everyone should have an opportunity to hear the Gospel message. But the reality is that only *some* will be drawn to it.

“Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me,” says Jesus. Again, the wording is important. “*Heard and learned*.” Just because someone *hears* Jesus doesn’t mean they *learn* from him. Christian theologians through the centuries have made a distinction between the *visible* and the *invisible* church. The *visible* people are those who show up; those we see on Sunday mornings; those who join the membership of the church (and we are glad to welcome you newcomers!). But the *invisible* church is the *true* church as determined by almighty God, comprised of all those people of every time and place who are *truly* drawn to the Gospel, regardless of whether or not they show up on Sunday mornings in the institutional church as it exists on earth. Not everybody in the *visible* church is necessarily a part of the *invisible* church, nor is the *invisible* church comprised only of those who are part of the *visible* church. It’s not *our* place to try to figure out who’s truly “in” or “out.” That’s a job for God. Our job is to keep teaching people about Jesus and spreading the good news of the Gospel in both word and deed. Some people will get it; other people won’t. Jesus was okay with that; we should be too.

Jesus continues: “Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father.” “The one who is from God” is, of course, Jesus; he is saying that he is the *only* one who has truly *seen* God, because he is the only one who is truly *from* God. All of us were *created* by God, but Jesus was “begotten, not made,” to use the words of the classic creed. We were all created; there was a time when we did not exist. Jesus was not created; there was *never* a time when *he* did not exist.

Jesus begins to wrap up his teaching. “Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life.” He’s trying to persuade the skeptics in his audience. Will they, or will they not, believe? Can they, or can they not, see that Jesus is *more* than just a man, that he truly is *from God*?

He returns to the food metaphor: “Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died.” That is so true. When the Israelites left Egypt and spent forty years wandering in the desert wilderness, they were fed by manna, bread from heaven, that God provided. That kept them alive ... but it did not keep them alive *forever*. It did not negate the fundamental reality and finitude of *death*. They all eventually died, every last one of them, and none of them believed that they were destined to a life *after* death. That concept didn’t exist yet. They thought they were just heading to Sheol, the Hebrews’ abode of the dead, akin to Hades or the Underworld in classic Greek and Roman mythology, the place where both the righteous and the unrighteous went when they died. A place of stillness and darkness, a place of *death* and not *life*. All those Israelites in the wilderness *died*. They had eaten the bread that God provided from heaven for forty years, and they still died. Jesus offers something similar, but

fundamentally different. “This is the bread that comes down from heaven,” he says, referring to himself, “so that one may eat of it and not die.” Through Jesus, by Jesus, because of Jesus, when our life here on this earth comes to an end, we are greeted not with the endless finality of Sheol, stillness and darkness, but rather with the precious – *absolutely precious* – gift of being able to go to the realm where Jesus himself came from. We’ve been given an invitation to go *where no one had gone before*. Well, almost no one. There was Enoch, and Elijah, and Melchizedek – three people in the Old Testament who appear to have reached heaven before anyone else. But with Jesus, the gates are now *wide open*. It’s like he has given each of us a gold-plated invitation. Take the fanciest wedding invitation you’ve ever seen, and add some more glitter and glitz to it. “I’m inviting you to *life*,” says Jesus. “*Real life, in eternity, with me.*”

He sums up: “I am the living bread that came down from heaven.” Not just the *bread* that came down from heaven, but the *living* bread. That manna, if it was left lying around, would get old and grow rotten. Jesus never gets old and he certainly doesn’t grow rotten. Okay, sure, some people have done rotten things in the name of Jesus – the brutality of the Crusades, the way some parts of Christianity have tried to legitimize both slavery and racism, the abuse of children by religious leaders, the way Christians have often treated people who do not fall into traditional categories of gender and sexuality, to name just a few examples. Travesties like those have often sent many people fleeing *away* from the church rather than *towards* it. But if we can get past all that rottenness ... there’s *nothing* rotten about Jesus. Jesus, the *true* Jesus, the *real* Jesus, the Jesus that exists *beyond* the institutional church and all its human sinfulness, *shines in magnificent brilliance*. He’s the bread, the *living* bread, that came down from heaven and gives life to this world. This is a bread that *never* gets stale and *never* grows moldy. “Whoever eats of this bread will live forever,” Jesus says, “and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.” He’s talking about his death, his *necessary* death, his *sacrificial* death, on the cross. The *only* way that we get *life forever* is for him to *truly die*. The crucifixion of Jesus is a necessary, integral step that *had to take place* in order for us to be given the *precious gift* that saves us from death.

When I was in seminary, my most beloved professor taught a course called “The Death of Jesus.” In the first week, we had to write a three-page paper answering two questions: “Did Jesus have to die? Why or why not?” That first paper wasn’t graded – it was just a simple assignment designed to get us to *think*. To take all that we had been taught about Jesus up to that point in our lives and articulate what we believed his death on the cross signified. It was comforting to know that we could write *whatever* and that we weren’t being graded on our content. Then we spent the next twelve weeks looking at what the New Testament had to say about Jesus’ death – not just the Gospels, but many other passages as well – along with pertinent passages in the Old Testament that are often associated with the death of Jesus. We also read a couple books on the significance of the death of Jesus by some contemporary biblical theologians. Then our final project was to write that same three-page essay a second time. *Did Jesus have to die? Why or why not?* The difference between where I started at the beginning of the semester and where I wound up at the end was significant. It’s amazing what happens when you actually *study* the scriptures. When you piece together links between *this* passage and *that* passage. When the light bulbs go off in your head. When it becomes *real* for you. My hope, my prayer, *always*, is that what we do here at this church helps Jesus *become real* for you. In *your* life. To help you understand, grasp, and *live into the reality* that Jesus *really is* the bread that comes down from heaven. To help you believe, know, and understand deep in your heart that he truly is the heavenly bread that gives you *life*.

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