

Epworth Chapel on the Green
August 12, 2012
Pentecost 11
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Deuteronomy 8:1-10
Psalm 34:1-8
Ephesians 4:25-5:2
John 6:37-51

His name was John Hunt, and he worked for a busy Wall Street brokerage firm. During the course of the business day, things were so hectic in the office that small talk was a luxury not afforded to the brokers.

So John was surprised one morning when a co-worker leaned across his desk and asked, “What’s up, John?”

John proceeded to tell him the troubles he had had over the weekend with his car, his girlfriend, and everything else in his life. The coworker looked quite distracted while John was speaking. Finally, his exasperated coworker leaned over to another employee and asked, “Bob, what’s the ticker symbol for Upjohn Pharmaceuticals?”

When it comes to John’s Gospel, especially chapter six, it can be easy for us to ask of John, “what’s up, John?” Because John speaks on so many different levels. This is especially the case in the discussion about bread, which is perhaps the mother of all biblical metaphors.

Jesus has been speaking to the crowds about bread, and about himself as the living bread, the true bread that comes down from heaven.

But to Jesus' listeners here, bread is simply bread, nothing more. It is not a sign or symbol of something more or better. You must remember that these people were not living in the wealthy West. Scarcity was the norm. From them, a lack of rain meant not a decrease in the price of corn or wheat at the harvest, but starvation. For Jesus' listeners, their next meal -- not new life -- was what occupied their minds.

Yet, in spite of this, Jesus still speaks to them of the true bread from heaven. Earlier, he pointed Nicodemus beyond birth to Birth (chapter 3), and the Samaritan woman beyond water to Water (chapter 4). Here he points his listeners beyond the meal of the evening before (the feeding of the 5,000) and even beyond the manna eaten by their ancestors in the wilderness, to the "true bread" that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.

His listeners at first seem to have an appetite for this true bread, *until* Jesus identifies *himself* as such. At this they murmur. It is easy to think of Jesus as being from Nazareth. It is another thing to think of Jesus as coming down from heaven.

Now, in what sense is Jesus the true bread from heaven?

It might be easy for us to think of Jesus as the Eucharistic bread. And while that may be true on one level, that is premature here in this case. We don't get hints of that line of thinking until verse 51 (the end of our lesson) and following.

Instead, the focus of our passage is on Jesus as the *Word of God*, the life giving Word of God that we find in the prologue to this Gospel (1:1-18). This is why there is such an emphasis from Jesus in this passage on *being taught of God, of hearing and learning of God* (cf. V. 45).

This is also the emphasis in Deuteronomy 8, where the author reminds the people that the children of Israel were led and fed in the wilderness to test and to teach them that material bread alone would not sustain them. What they needed was the Word of God.

That's what Jesus is telling the befuddled crowd here. Jesus himself is that life-giving Word of God. Jesus reveals God fully to us. God draws people to himself through Jesus. You cannot bypass Jesus and find God. Jesus is God with a face on. In his life, his teachings, his ministry, and his suffering and death -- Jesus reveals who God is and draws persons to God.

So, in what sense is Jesus the true bread from heaven?

Well, I would say this much: if you want to know God, if you want to have life in God; if you want to have a relationship with God, the relationship God designs you to have -- Jesus is the one through Whom that is made possible and

actual in your life. To believe in him and to know him is to know God, and to have life eternal.

The question faced by those who heard Jesus at Capernaum is in a sense also our question today. Their question: Is Jesus from Nazareth (i.e., just a man, albeit a very wise one?)

Or is Jesus from heaven? Is he the eternal Son of God who reveals God fully to us and does God's will by dying for all on the Cross?

The destinies of those original hearers hinged on how they answered this question. And guess what? So does ours.

As we come to the Lord's Table this morning, let us come with the awareness that the bread which we receive is not merely material "stuff." The bread which we receive is also the means, the channel, whereby Christ himself encounters us, and nourishes us with his grace.

So come in faith to the One who can satisfy every hunger in your life.

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.