

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

FOODSTUFFS

John 6:35, 41-51

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Analysis by Jerome Burce

35 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." 41 Then the Jews began to complain about him because he said, "I am the bread that came down from heaven." 42 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'?" 43 Jesus answered them, "Do not complain among yourselves. 44 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. 45 It 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. 46 Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father. 47 Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life. 48 I am the bread of life. 49 Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. 50 This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. 51 I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."

Note: Aging readers who grew up with the King James Version will want to know that the "complain" of vv. 41 and 43 is KJV's "murmur." Pop goes the connection to those stories we heard as children about Israelites "murmuring" in the wilderness. John's

first hearers would have felt the same “pop,” though in their case via Greek. That’s because John’s original verb is the one used in what was then the standard Greek translation of Exodus 16, where the wilderness murmurs begin. So too in Numbers 14, where they continue post-Sinai.

DIAGNOSIS: “Yuck!”

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *“Not This Again!”*

Grizzle, grizzle, grizzle. Ancestors did it (cf. v. 49). So do we, John’s “Jews” in 21st-century Christian garb, God’s chosen ones with a mark to prove it (baptism, in our case). Like those ancestors we want to live. We also itch to do the right thing, not least when it comes to God (v. 28). Such living and doing requires food, be it bread for the belly or the word that sustains a person’s connection to God. Does God provide? Of course, and profusely, and “even without our prayer” (Luther, Small Catechism). And over and over again, we on the receiving end say things like “Boring!” “Insufficient.” “Change the menu!” See the noise about “miserable” manna in Numbers 21:5, or the objection in the present text to Jesus as Joseph’s son (v. 42). See too the rampant discontent in American churches with what happens at Sunday services, as if the weekly eating of the “living bread” (v. 51) will not and cannot satisfy unless it’s augmented by a communal leap onto whatever bandwagon of innovation—technological or liturgical, also theological and ethical—that the Zeitgeist sends our way.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *“What’s Wrong with the Cook?”*

Murmurs signal misgivings. Does the God we pray to give a hang? Does he care enough, that is, to vary the wilderness menu (thus

the ancestors) or to spare us the absurdities of one who, the longer he talks, sounds more and more like a charlatan with an overweening ego (the John 6 crowd)? Does he notice (we ask today) that Christ crucified is yesterday's news? Or that a church, wanting to engage the over-stimulated and ever-demanding citizenry of the 21st century, its own kids included, has got to dish up jazzier fare, more pleasing to the crowds? Such things, of course, get said sotto voce. No one dreams in the present text of complaining to Jesus directly. No one dreams today of praying our complaints out loud, in church, say, or even in the Monday night committee meeting. We assert that God is patient and gracious, but we can't imagine he'd be that patient, that gracious. So on we mutter, and mutter and mutter, and always "among ourselves" (v. 43).

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *The Baker's Revenge*
As if. As if God is deaf. As if God won't notice our murmurs even as Jesus notices the noise surrounding him (v. 43). (Thought to ponder: When was the last time somebody stood up to contend at a congregational meeting or a larger church assembly expecting that the Lord himself would be marking her words?) "No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father," Jesus says (v. 44), the point being that the mutterers are missing God's best work on their behalf, said work unfolding before their blind eyes even as they beef. The same point holds for today's muttering multitude who therefore find themselves in the same pickle as those who grizzled before them. God gives of his best. They ignore and despise it. They're left with God at his worst, the God who remembers the noise of murmurers and holds it against them. Thus, "your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died" (v. 49). So with the rest of us unbelievers.

PROGNOSIS: “Wow!”

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *When the Baker Got Baked*

But someone else died too. Notice the multi-lingual identifier that God tags him with via the unbelieving Pilate: “Jesus of Nazareth,” yes, Joseph’s boy, the kid next door (v. 42), but who is in fact “the King of the Jews,” i.e. the one stuck with ultimate responsibility for every murmuring unbeliever, up to and including the ones who gripe furiously about owning him as king (19:19-21). The king’s job? To eat the consequences of his subjects’ misbelieving misbehavior and thereafter—assuming a thereafter—to feed them; to give them bread and the life that comes of that. Kings as a rule don’t get a “thereafter.” They mutter too, the lot of them, not least about their subjects. Not so King Jesus, whose “it is finished” signals the end of a hitherto unbroken tradition of human grumbling and complaint (19:30). Having in this way given his flesh “for the life of the world” (v. 51) he gets his Easter, the dawn for this king of an everlasting “thereafter.” Notice how right out of the blocks he tracks down one Peter, that mutterer turned denier, and treats him to a second seaside bread-and-fish meal, this one accompanied by the food of restoration (21:1ff). King’s job accomplished, at least for the time being.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Fresh Bread, Same Old, Same Old*

Stick for a moment with Jesus and Peter. Recall how the King serves the second restorative meal in three helpings (“Feed...Feed...Feed,” 21:15-17). We wondered, did we, about the grace and patience of God (Step 2 above)? Here, for mutterers, is where seeing becomes believing. In other words, as Jesus was with Peter the Jew, so is Jesus with Jerome the Jew (speaking of self), the same thing said to him again and again, over and over, until at last it sinks in. Somewhere in that process it

also starts to dawn that the razzle dazzle glory of God as provider lies not in an ever-changing menu or in brand new words we hadn't heard before, but rather in the unfailing steadiness of the same Word, the same Sunday morning fare: "the body of Christ, given for you" to "take and eat," where "you" is yet another Peter, another Jerome or Anyone Else who has just spent another wilderness week grizzling with the worst of them. To believe that God is this patient, this gracious "for you" is to glimpse one's own Easter tinting the horizon (v. 47).

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *"Please, Sir, Can I Have More?"*

Comes then the true innovation which is also nothing new. At some point a human being quits grasping for life and griping at God and begins instead to give herself away with Christ, as a piece of his flesh, for the life of the world (v. 51). She does so without fear, as one "taught by God" (v. 45) to count without question on a providing that has launched her even now into life eternal (v. 47). Scarcely can she fathom how anyone would call this boring or insufficient, or would think to demand some word for this week's lunch other than the word that Christ her Lord and God has filled her with already. As for bandwagons (says she), who needs them? I've got Jesus to follow. And follow she does, above all in her own gracious patience with the grumbling many who still don't get it. Innovation? This is it, at its most dazzling, a person made new by the Father who has drawn her to Jesus and fixed her heart on his promise (v. 44). Still, it's nothing new in the sense that God has done this very thing before, over and over in countless saints, his chosen ones. Blessed is this saintly batch when, biting our tongues, we let him do it in us.