

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

LET THEM EAT BREAD?

John 6: 35, 41-51

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Analysis by Stephan K. Turnbull

35Jesus 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. 41Then the Jews began to complain about him because he said, "I am the bread that came down from heaven." 42They 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'?" 43Jesus answered them, "Do not complain among yourselves. 44No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me; and I will raise that person up on the last day. 45It 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. 46Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father. 47Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life. 48I am the bread of life. 49Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. 50This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. 51I 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."

DIAGNOSIS: Starved and Therefore Starving

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *The Starving*

Don't Need Bread

This pericope leaves 21st-century Christians with the distinct impression that Jesus ought to undergo some sensitivity training. We need him to tone down his exclusivist language. It's not nice anymore to claim to be "the" bread of life. His persistent drone about being the means to eternal life and being raised up on the last day is a real downer for us. Who are we to say that the bread that suits our taste is really any better than anyone else's?

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *We Don't Need Bread Either*

Our lack of confidence may have broad epistemological roots, but the taproot is a spiritual problem. Our lack of conviction about Christ's solution corresponds directly to our superficial estimation of the problem. We allow ourselves to go on believing that things aren't that bad, that most people are just one good mentor or one good meal away from real change, that the world's problems are solvable by just the right balance of diplomacy, education, and military correction. And the solution starts at home, or so we think. There's nothing wrong with me that can't be fixed by the right combination of insight and effort. What a strange notion Jesus has that hunger can only be fixed by the bread he offers.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *But Starving Leads to Dying*

Of course the truth will make itself plainly evident in matters like these. Saying no to Jesus' solution will not make the problem go away. Starving people do eventually die without bread, no matter who tells them that they don't need to eat. And people who say no to the bread that gives eternal life face a prospect even more bleak. And this goes also for those of us who say no to this bread when we deny it also to others.

PROGNOSIS: Fed and Therefore Feeding

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Well Fed*

Fortunately our denying the need for bread does nothing to diminish its nutritional effect once it hits the stomach. Perhaps even better, our ignorant pride didn't prevent others from setting the bread of life on our own tables once upon a time. The truth that Jesus gave bread which was his own flesh, given on the cross for the life of the world, may have seemed like strange fare at the time, but it is the nourishment that leads to eternal life. Better even than Tolkien's Elvin lembas; a bite of this bread strengthens not only the body for a day but the heart for all eternity. Trusting in Jesus gives us the confidence in his promise that "we shall never hunger" again and that he shall "raise [us] up on the last day."

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Seeing the Hunger*

Thus strengthened by our confidence in the solution, we gain the courage to look at the problem more honestly. We see first of all that the deleterious effects of starvation are everywhere. Famished lives surround us, and the impoverishment is fueling a dangerous rebellion. The Christ-less are devouring whatever they can find to swallow, and it's killing us all. And upon further examination we see something else just as important: our own hunger. We see how badly we needed the bread of life, and we recognize with some embarrassment our own folly in settling for anything less.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Feeding the Starving*

Seeing then the difference that real bread makes, we are grasped not merely by a willingness to speak the truth about "the" bread of life but by a compulsion to do so. It hits us: People out there are eating the same stinking, maggoty bread that we used

to eat before we knew any better, and we can't let that go on. God wouldn't. We know this because Jesus didn't. Now, neither shall we.

Does it need to be said that Christians thus compelled to share the Bread of Life with the world will certainly not limit themselves to sharing the metaphorical sort alone? The good news of Jesus for us and for others is that it manifests itself in both word and deed.