

Thanksgiving (USA)

A SWEET HUNGER

John 6:25-35

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Analysis by Bruce T. Martin

6:25When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, "Rabbi, when did you come here?" 26Jesus answered them, "Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. 27Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal." 28Then they said to him, "What must we do to perform the works of God?" 29Jesus answered them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent." 30So they said to him, "What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing? 31Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'" 32Then Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. 33For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." 34They said to him, "Sir, give us this bread always." 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."

DIAGNOSIS: Blinded By Reality

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *We Want Real Bread, Sir!*

Do not scorn the “crowd” (6:22, 24), the ubiquitous “they” in our text. They could just as well be us. They were hungry for the umpteenth time. They had just been fed (6:1-15) and were looking for Jesus to give them another handout (v. 26). Who can blame them? Every day was a new quest for bread (see Luke 11:3). Who Jesus is or what he is doing here does not even cross their minds. Even after Jesus redirects their attention to “the food that endures” (v. 26), their sole focus is on what they “must do to perform the works of God” (v. 28; that is, the works that God desires of us) in order to receive another bounty. There is no other possibility for them. Work is work, and bread is bread. They were hungry and willing to work. Jesus’ attempt to change their focus, from something they “must do” to something “God is doing” in their midst (v. 29), fails to convince them. They want a provable “sign” (vv. 26, 30). But since they cannot conceive of an act that is not a “work” or a “performance” like they themselves “do” (this-for-that), they cannot see Jesus as anything other than a miracle worker or “rabbi” (v. 25)-as someone they can “work” on and, if it suits them, “do” away with, first by complaining about this or that (vv. 41-71) and finally by murdering him (19:6-7). Jesus’ generosity and ultimately Jesus himself is too much of a scandal for the crowd and their leaders to bear. The Jewish People are not exceptional in their exclusion of Jesus! Every social group on earth acts this way; even the Church. In the final analysis, real hunger leads inexorably to socially acceptable murder, even to the murder of the Son of God.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Blind to True Reality*

Our ubiquitous “they” were not stupid! They were aware of the

messianic promise that Messiah would replicate the “manna” feedings as well as other wondrous deeds (Ex. 16; Ps. 78). But they were expecting real bread! Jesus’ interpretation of scripture (note: by the Master Interpreter) by distinguishing their “ancestors” (v. 31, in Greek literally, “fathers”) from Jesus’ “Father” (v. 32), and real/edible bread from “true bread” (v. 32), fell on deaf ears. But Jesus’ words sounded too unreal. They were blinded by their own reality. They could not discern that Jesus himself was the fulfillment of the messianic promises. The messianic gift par excellence that Jesus called “faith” (v. 29, “have faith!” is better than the NRSV’s “that you believe”) was so contrary to their world (as defined by “work”) that Jesus was, as it were, invisible to them. And we are exactly like them! Wrapped up in our own realities, we do not discern the gracious gift of Jesus’ presence among us, except (as a concession to our blindness) when he comes to us in the form of edible, consecrated bread. Yes, we are that blind!

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *The Bread that Kills*

The text doesn’t identify our most dreadful problem, the problem we have with God himself. As long as we keep eating ordinary bread, as long as we keep expecting messianic solutions such as miracles (manna) or human ingenuity (science) to solve the impossible demands of life, all of which end in death, then God becomes a real problem for us. As already noted in Steps 1 and 2, and although the truth remains invisible to us, it is Jesus himself-as represented in the countless victims of our social and religious scapegoating-whom we mistrust and murder, time and time again, and his actual crucifixion bears this out. All in the name of what we think we need in order to sustain ourselves-forever if we can. But we die nonetheless. Not because we have failed to conquer the world but because we refuse to give up our assumed autonomy over against God who then leaves us to our own sorry devices. It is as though the “bread” we eat in order to

stay alive (that is, our work: our fine culture and our fine religion) is laced with poison; yet it is the only food available. As our rejection of Jesus demonstrates, we always prefer our own “real bread” to God’s “true bread.” And so we die coram deo (before God), not only of physical starvation (the body gives out) but of spiritual starvation. What an unhappy ending to show for all our hard work-exactly!

PROGNOSIS: A Sweet Hunger

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *The Bread of Life, Death’s Un-Doing*

Christ came to us unexpectedly (“from heaven”, v. 33) with a gift that we could never conceive of nor purchase at any cost. Although the Son of God was rejected by everyone (1:11) and forcibly removed from our existence (19:19), after his resurrection he did not destroy us but forgave us (20:19-23). Jesus’ death and resurrection is a sure “sign” (v. 30) of God’s handiwork; it signifies that our “real” life is perishing whereas his “true” life is eternal. In Jesus (the person, not some doctrine about him), God is at work reclaiming the world as his own. With Jesus’ death, now understood as the culmination of all human existence coram deo (before God), God undermines every human attempt to justify itself-for no one can stand before God after they have murdered the Son of God. With Jesus’ resurrection, God offers a new possibility for us-the way of forgiveness-that does not necessitate murdering anyone. Jesus’ “eternal life” (v. 27) is therefore God’s merciful gift to us, an un-doing, so to speak, of Sin and Death. Because Jesus of Nazareth himself has forgiven us, an entirely new way of life for us has arrived. He is, therefore, “the bread of life” (v. 34).

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *From the Inside Out*

We are nourished by “the bread of life” from the inside out. It is what Jesus called “faith” (v. 29). Faith in Jesus is itself the new creation “from heaven,” a gift from God the Father (v. 32). This gift is not an add-on to our old life, for that life is under a death-sentence. Rather, faith in Christ is the recognition that Death is behind us and Christ Jesus is ever before us and in us and with us. Faith is therefore “true” Life, openness to God and to God’s future. Because this faith recognizes Jesus, he is no longer invisible to us. He is recognized by the faithful in anyone who is excluded from life and wherever the word of forgiveness is proclaimed.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : A Sweet Hunger

The life we now live is forgiven life. True-life, straddling as it does real-life, is always on the edge, always in question, always dependent, always “hungry” for the bread of life-though it is a sweet hunger, so to speak. What does this sweet hunger “do”? In a sense it can do nothing, at least, nothing ordinary. It can’t be pinned down. It cannot satiate physical hunger, nor prevent Death from making its final claim upon us. On the other hand, it can do anything without having to worry about death. The big “D” is reduced to a little “d.” In other words, the forgiven life is free from the normal expectations of the world, and thus free for the world. The true question now becomes: What do you want to do, now that you don’t have to? [Fill in the blank; there is plenty of room]. What you are now doing is honored among us by the holy word, “love” (see 1 John 4). Such acts are also called “good works” by the faithful, and are true “works of God” (v. 28) in that they are inspired (in-Spirited), like “faith” (v. 29), by the Spirit of God. Thus, we do not confuse love that is Spirit-born with acts of kindness or justice or charity or philanthropy or any other so-called good works. Such works are certainly good as far as the old creation is concerned, but they are not truly good because they convey no

ultimate satisfaction. "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied" (Matthew 5:6). As a description of our new life in Christ, we may say that good works completely satisfy the sweet hunger of faith (v. 35).