

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

EATING AND DRINKING NON-STOP

John 6:51-58

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Analysis by Dana Bjorlin

51 “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live for ever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”

52 The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” 53 So Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. 54 Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; 55 for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. 56 Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. 57 Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. 58 This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever.”

Author's Note: For quite some time after I started to work as a chaplain at my hospital, a brochure in the tract rack above one of the computers continually caught my attention as I charted and logged. Repeatedly I'd catch the first lines of words out the corner of my eye: “When Eating & Drinking Soup.” One problem though: I repeatedly was mis-reading that title. The brochure is for palliative care: “When Eating & Drinking Stop.” Perhaps my misreading of that title was why it continued to catch my attention. Misreading Jesus' words seems to play a major role in

the Jews' reaction to his words in this week's gospel reading.

DIAGNOSIS: Misunderstanding Eating and Drinking

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Daily Expectation*

Those of us who dwell in the First World have the regular expectation of receiving our daily sustenance. So we may miss how big a deal daily bread really is. In verses previous to this week's reading, however, the crowds quickly grasped what a big deal it would be to have "a king" (v. 15) readily on hand to supply their usual needs. On the other hand, what they and we can miss is how such a daily expectation may move over to a daily survival method that can be either shallow or even detrimental, avoiding deeper issues of how we live once our daily needs have been met.

In some ways our use of our daily bread is not much different than the daily drink needed by an alcoholic to simply cope with life itself, while deeper issues remain.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Mistaking What (or Who) Will Sustain*

The way we receive or take for granted daily bread belies our attitude toward the Giver of every good thing including food: the great Lord of heaven and earth (v. 32). Sadly, the daily concern for the necessities of life can also become a substitute for true sustenance, for the true daily bread. In the emergency room and ICUs where I work, we see those who come in malnourished while reporting that they literally drink gallons or cases of alcoholic beverages on a daily basis. (Granted much has been made of more wholesomely viewing alcoholism as a disease to be treated like heart disease or diabetes than viewing it as a moral failing.) Seemingly, they are missing out on "true food" and "true drink" (v. 55)-which is killing them.

Likewise is the case of all who miss out on a nourishing relationship with the One who is Giver and Sustainer of all of life (v. 57).

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *No Palliation*

If the above problems were as simple as eating and drinking soup (I'm thinking here of a really thick gumbo or a rich, hearty minestrone), we might have a choice of when to stop. But Jesus points out that the time will come when all eating and drinking will be stopped. Although the ancestors ate the manna of Moses, they died (v. 58). So will you, says Jesus to his opponents and to us.

Palliative care is care for the time near the end of life when treatment switches from seeking curative, body-healing interventions to attempting to maintain a patient's physical comfort until death. Often the decision for palliation happens "when eating and drinking stop." Yet despite Jesus' warnings (see v. 27), his opponents refuse to recognize their plight. They want to keep on eating and drinking—that is living—in the same old way of their ancestors: getting their daily fill or making substitutions of their own choosing and/or their own addictions. Thanking God when it suits them or ignoring God and God's messengers when it suits them. But Jesus refuses to palliate, refuses to give comfort to such as these until they realize the truth: "that which your ancestors ate" resulted in their death (v. 58). Jesus refuses to palliate until they realize that death can only be avoided by abiding in Jesus (vv. 56-57)!

PROGNOSIS: Discerning the Bread of Life

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Last Day Resurrection (v. 54)*

This week's Gospel reading is the fourth of five Sunday readings in a row focused on Jesus' so-called Bread of Life sayings. Many

commentators suggest that it is recorded by John to substitute for the lack of any mention of the Lord's Supper or of an institution of the Eucharist in this gospel. Martin Luther, however, in a sermon for Pentecost Wednesday points out that Christ is giving himself in the flesh (through the cross) as spiritual food, so that the world may live. Despite the way the images may appear (see also vv. 63, 40, 47), "the whole chapter [6]... speaks of nothing but the spiritual food, namely faith" (Lenker ed., © 2000, Baker, p. 402; see also Luther's Works, Vol. 23, American Ed.). Because Jesus gives himself for the life of the world, the world can believe (v. 51). And the promise of eternal life through such receiving/ believing is mentioned by Jesus repeatedly (vv. 51b, 54, 58). Truly, "I will raise them up on the last day" (v. 54).

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : Reckless Abandon

Recklessly, Jesus presses the point of what receiving/ believing in him is like. He even invites those who believe to "chow down" with such faith, sumptuously and exaggeratedly using an image that suggests munching on flesh (v. 57) and slurping up blood. Whereas, the manna of the Old Testament was "just enough"-now there's more than enough, enough for the world (v. 33; cf. John 4, where the water doesn't stop or fail)! Faith trusts in this abundance, and sees it not only in the ordinary stuff of bread and wine, but in the other ordinary stuff of life, and anticipates it in the promise of eternal life.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : Loaves Forever

And the promise is tremendous! Those who eat and drink have eternal life (v. 54). Those who eat and drink "abide in me, and I in them" (v. 56). "Whoever eats me, will live because of me" (v. 57). "Whoever eats this bread will live forever" (v. 51b). "The one who eats this bread will live forever" (v. 58). Knowing the sacrifice of Christ, for us, leads not only to a meal and a

celebration that never ends, but to our own hands and lips opening to share this very same Christ and the gifts he bears.