

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost, Gospel, Year B

THE BREAD THAT SATISFIES

John 6:35, 41-51

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

Analysis by Nathan Hall

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."

Author's Note: While not dwelled upon in this commentary, please note that there is a long history of seeing resonance between

the bread of life, which is Christ's flesh (6:51), with the bread we receive in the sacrament.

DIAGNOSIS: Buying the Bread that Does Not Satisfy

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): People Need to Eat
In a world that produces enough food to feed everybody, hunger persists. Wealthy Americans are busily pulling rotten food from their refrigerators, while neighbors around the corner and around the world are malnourished or empty-bellied. Perhaps this waste is the result of apathetic inattention on the part of the food-secure. Perhaps it is caused by our consumer capitalist system which only values and caters to those who can buy. Unlike the wilderness-wandering manna eaters, where rich and poor alike had daily bread for the taking, we live among people who do not have enough.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Hearts Are Hungry Too

It is not simply the body that needs nourishment, and the very people who are busy transferring the contents of their refrigerators to the dumpster can are sharing in a universal hunger, or longing. This is a hunger for belonging, meaning, or purpose. While this hunger is intrinsically human, I suspect that the most recent generations suffer most intensely. By contrast with previous generations which were told to knuckle down and work hard at any job that pays, to live in community, and to be dutiful, recent generations have been brought up to live our dreams. But what if our dreams do not provide any ultimate meaning? Further, the culture, which provided structure and meaning to the lives of previous generations, has been toppled. The world is big, and access to a range of ideas is only a click away. The result is a generation that is left to its own devices, to make meaning for itself as it can. If you fail to make meaning, tough. People feel hungry for purpose, and

they feel superfluous.

(I suspect that this famine breeds violence and riots. According to the accounts I have seen, many who identify as white supremacist are brought into that community because of the identity, belonging, and purpose the unified hatred for others provides. The suicide epidemic seems to be connected to the despair promulgated by the demand for self-determination, self-interest, self-promotion, and selfie-ism.)

We are left with an aching hunger, which no amount of self-help can satisfy.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): God Sends Another Famine

We have not found the food to feed ourselves, yet we continue to stuff ourselves with junk. Fortunately, God is also dissatisfied with our choices. Yet as the parent of the addict knows, rock-bottom is sometimes the only place one can get reoriented. So God gives us up to degrading passions (Romans 1:26), leaving us in our misery, until we can see the end (telos) of our ways. God gives us over to our futile efforts, the end of which is despair and death. God lets us keep eating the bad stuff, until starvation sets in.

PROGNOSIS: God Gives the Bread of Life

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Fed with the Bread of Life

At the point where the natural consequences of our poor diet come crashing in upon us, another source of nourishment is offered beyond anything we could fabricate: Jesus, the bread of life. Out of deep concern, faithfulness, and love God is not content to see us reaping the death we have sown, and so instead God gives life: "I am the bread of life...This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. 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" (6:48, 50-51). In the cross and open tomb of Christ, God gives the gift of life where our own understanding and effort can only produce death.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Our Hearts Feast on Christ

Those who had been busy hunting for community while doing their best to fabricate meaning and purpose are given a new orientation. No longer left to their own devices, those who are fed the bread of life take in the presence of God that reorients them to the world. They know their worth as creatures redeemed by God. They see the pursuit of goodness, truth, love, and beauty as an act of praise upon which a life may be well spent, but upon which the believer is not dependent. The hunger has been satisfied by God's provision in Christ. This is the gift that accompanies belief.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Distributed Goods

As our hearts are fed and reoriented to an outlook that is centered in God's love in Christ, a natural consequence is that we care for the things for which God cares. Perhaps we even see it as an act of thanksgiving, praise, and joy to see if we can make sure the food, which would have rotted in our refrigerators might make it to those in need instead.