

For the Life of the World
9th Sunday After Pentecost – August 13th, 2000
John 6: 35; 41-51

Over the past three Sundays, our Gospel has drawn us into deeper and deeper waters. Two weeks ago, we beheld a miracle of generous abundance: “people ate their fill of bread and were satisfied.” It was an awesome but straightforward story – the only miracle, by the way, recorded in all four Gospels. Meditating upon it, we can easily draw conclusions about God’s generosity, feeding the hungry of the world from the abundance with which he has blessed us, and so on. Wonderful, yes; complex...well....

Last week, things began to get more complex. The crowd, not surprisingly, was thrilled *because* Jesus had given them bread. But Jesus wanted them to reflect on *why* the bread was given. Suddenly the focus was not bread, but belief: trust in the One from whose hand the bread was given, trust that this One was the source not only of bread for the body but of life for the soul.

The final words of last week’s reading are repeated at the beginning of this week’s: “*I am the bread come down from heaven. I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.*”

This is difficult stuff. It’s no wonder those who listened began to object. Here was a rabbi – a man many had known since he was a child – making an incredible claim for himself and setting that claim before them as the basis of a new, deeper relationship with the living God. And, much

like a mule at water's edge, they balked at being led into those deep, unfamiliar waters.

Let's face it; we don't have to be confronted by Jesus' extravagant words about who he is in order to balk about being led into deeper waters. Often we struggle against deeper knowledge or insight, even when it concerns something familiar, something we take delight or comfort from. How many people go into marriage eagerly anticipating romance, passion and love, and only reluctantly learn difficult lessons about faithfulness, commitment and forgiveness along the way. How many young women get pregnant hoping to receive unconditional, unquestioning love – only to learn, during long nights of crying and long days of washing diapers, that unconditional love is something they must first *give* before the child knows how to return it.

And how often do many people receive, even gratefully, from God's generous hand, but struggle against the difficult challenges of faithfulness and the absolute claim of God upon their lives. Jesus said as much in last week's Gospel: "You seek me because you ate your fill of bread, not because you seek a sign." In the shorthand language of John's Gospel, a *sign* is a token of Jesus' authority and power as the Son of God. Often a sign is a miracle, such as the feeding of the multitude. But it is always performed in order to evoke a deeper, more radical faith in God among those who perceive it.

It really would be simpler to have a "Wading Pool Jesus," wouldn't it? That Jesus would be one who would always keep us safe and never make us afraid or uncomfortable with his questions, claims or expectations. We

could splash in the waters of his love and emerge feeling cleansed and refreshed. And then we could go about our business, only returning to the safe shallow warm waters of his acceptance, generosity and compassion when we felt the need of those things again.

But the real Jesus of the Gospels will have none of that. Even the miracle of feeding, so deceptively simple on its surface, was designed as a ramp, so to speak, to lead people into the deeper waters of God's work and will for them and for the world. And the drop-off is pretty sudden and steep. Listen to his words: "*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.... *Everyone* who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me.... *I* am the living bread that comes 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.*"

No one. Anyone. Everyone. Whoever. The world. My flesh. These are sweeping, dramatic words that tumble us into deep waters right quick. If you're like many people, when you stop to examine them, you come up sputtering for breath. *No one comes unless drawn by the Father?* Wait a minute. Does that mean God isn't even interested in atheists, skeptics, Buddhists, Jews, and Muslims – none of whom believe Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God? And wait another minute – does that mean that those who "accept Jesus as their personal Savior" in some dramatic conversion experience are no different than those who were brought by parents and baptized as babies? All were simply drawn, along different pathways, by God?

And how about this one: *Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me.* But isn't it supposed to be the other way around – that only through Jesus do we really come to know the Father, whom no one has seen except the Son? And does that mean that all the teaching, preaching, Bible study and so forth that we do is alike a divine lottery – in those human words, some will hear the voice of God (because he is drawing them) and some less fortunate ones won't?

Or how about this: *Whoever eats of this bread will live forever.* It's clear that eating, believing, and eternal life are closely linked; those who believe are those whom God draws and those who believe are the ones who eat the bread from heaven. But in the next breath, our Lord says, *The bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world.* For the life of the world, not just for the ones drawn by God. Anybody here want to think about what *that* all means?!

Well, actually I'd urge you to wait a bit on that, or on any of the other questions I just posed. Because immediately plunging into them is a little bit like being thrown into the ocean and fretting about the motives of the bloke that threw you in. It may be important, but your first order of business is to swim, or float, or drown!

You see, Jesus isn't interested in discussing these interesting and even important questions. He's interested in inviting those whom God is drawing, into a deeper and deeper relationship with God. He's interested in having us experience a relationship so intimate, so profound, that he will eventually speak of it in terms of union – the oneness he himself shares with the Father who has sent him. However urgent and legitimate our

questions and concerns, Jesus does not want us holding him at arm's length so that we can examine and critique God's intentions for us and for the world. Rather, he wants to hold us in the same union of love with his Father that he himself has – and there, swimming or floating or drowning in the immensity of that love, we will be able to ask whatever we will, rightly and fruitfully. *No answer will make sense outside of that relationship and union.*

Think of a newlywed couple, discussing things like truthfulness, faithfulness, and forgiveness. "Will you still love me if such-and-such happens? Can we really talk about loving, honoring, respecting for richer, for poorer, for better and for worse, in sickness and in health, until death parts us? Aren't those terribly sweeping promises?" All important questions. But it isn't until they're thrown into the crucible of life together, with all its mistakes and joys, that they can begin realistically even to see the outlines of their answers. It isn't until they've lived "inside" those promises, so to speak, and wrestled with the claims those promises make upon them despite their own preferences or feelings at a given moment, that they can begin to shape living and life-giving responses to those questions and those claims.

The kind of intimacy, the depths that Jesus speaks of, can make us very uncomfortable. Belief isn't a matter of emotional feelings or intellectual assent. It's a matter of eating, absorbing the very life of the Son of God into our cells and souls, being changed from the inside out, digesting the stuff of divine life. In John's Gospel, this is very explicit. In Greek the term "flesh" denotes "meat;" it's a physical word that in our Lord's mouth

almost seems gross and offensive. He could have used a less uncomfortable word. He didn't. Only such an intimate, ultimate word, bespeaking an almost unthinkable union, could drive home his point: Eternal life isn't a matter of accepting a gift at arm's length, it's being drawn into the heart and life of God. It's being fed with the life of God. It's being transformed by his Son into people who share his essence, his "divine DNA" so that we might be united with God forever in bonds of unshakeable love.

From *within* that union, perhaps we could ask a different question. What could happen to the *world*, if we who have been drawn so deeply into God's love should live, like Elijah, "in the strength of that food" on our life's pilgrimage in this world? What else could it be but the giving of bread for the hungry and life for the perishing? For aren't we, who have eaten this heavenly bread, the flesh of Jesus Christ our Savior, now "one flesh" with him, given by God as we have been drawn by God - for the life of the world? For God so loved the world that he gave his Son... and by the power of the Holy Spirit, that means he gives *us, too*.