

The Second Act
9th Sunday After Pentecost - August 2nd, 2009
Exodus 16:2-15; John 6:24-35

There are times when I read John's Gospel and mutter, "Huh?" Nicodemus comes to Jesus, asks a simple question, and all at once we're talking about being born from above and wind blowing where it wills. Jesus asks a Samaritan woman for a drink, and suddenly we're hearing about 5 previous husbands, the mark of a prophet, and where to worship God. Did I miss a left turn to Albuquerque someplace?!

In chapter 6, heard over several weeks, what begins as a straightforward miracle - the feeding of a multitude - morphs into a discussion of manna, performing the works of God, and Jesus' pronouncement, "I am the bread of life." What starts out simple suddenly becomes complex and mysterious. Slow down! How'd you get us *here*?!

What helped me was remembering what it was like to read a play by Shakespeare. They all have several acts. In the first act, characters are introduced and some significant event takes place or is anticipated. In the second act, there are complications. People act on their own agendas, yet are drawn into the larger drama prefigured in the first act. Often they have faulty assumptions and incomplete information. All is puzzlement and confusion, even as the action moves forward.

In the third act, these characters, with all their misinformation and personal drum-beating, cause something critical to happen. In the fourth act, the consequences of that crisis, peoples' reactions to it, and some sort of conclusion round out the drama.

Today's Gospel finds us in the second act of a drama. Last week was the opening act. Jesus, disciples, loaves and fish, 5,000 hungry people, and a miracle of abundance set the stage. The crowd's determination to make Jesus king, and his withdrawal from them, propel us into today's act: the confrontation of Jesus and the crowd the next day.

Jesus lets them (and us) know they're off-base. "You don't seek me because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill." Signs? What signs? Did I just miss the left turn to Albuquerque?

Evidently; for Jesus continues: "Don't work for perishable food but for food that endures to eternal life. The Son of Man will provide it; the Father has set his seal on him." It's clear that Jesus isn't talking about Wonder Bread with an extended shelf life. So what *does* he mean? Who is this Son of Man? To the crowds, it wasn't immediately obvious that Jesus was speaking of himself. To them, he was a wandering rabbi: gifted, set apart by God for some purpose, but a *man*. What sort of "seal" has God set upon *him*? Typical of Act Two in a drama, questions and confusion abound.

The multitude, however, is game. Hearing that they must work for this mysterious bread of eternal life, they ask an obvious question: "What must we do to perform this work, which surely is a work ordained by God?" Jesus' answer raises the tension level: "The work of God is to believe in the one he has sent." He makes it clear that *he* is the one sent by God, because someone in the crowd immediately shoots back a challenge: "Prove it! What are your credentials? Why should we trust in *you* as our way of doing God's work that results in eternal life?"

It's a good question. Why should this first-century crowd, or we ourselves, entrust our hope of eternal life to this engaging, sometimes mysterious rabbi? How does he differ from John the Baptist or any other charismatic preacher? They were a dime a dozen. How is Jesus different from present-day cult leaders, motivational speakers, best-selling authors, or televangelists? They're a dime a dozen, too! Why put all our eggs in Jesus' basket?

Again the crowd presses the issue. "Moses had credentials to lead our ancestors in the wilderness. He gave them manna: bread from heaven! He earned their trust! Now how are you going to earn ours?"

Jesus propels us into the heart of the drama. First, he reminds the crowd of their mistaken assumptions. "It wasn't Moses, but God, who fed them bread from heaven. That bread does more than dispel

physical hunger. It gives life to the world." Moved by an inkling of Jesus' intent, the crowd says, "Sir, give us this bread always."

Jesus' next words are the unexpected climax to this act of the divine drama. More, they are challenge, invitation and applecart-upsetting good news for the hungry, questioning crowd and for us. "*I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry. Whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.*" With those words, the curtain rings down on Act Two of John's meditation on feeding the 5000.

I am the bread of life. Not barley loaves, not manna; *I* am the bread come down from heaven for eternal life. What does Jesus mean by this? What are we to make of his words - and of him?

The smart-aleck answer is, "Come back next week for Act Three, Scene One, and see how this unfolds!" That's good advice. How much more you'll get out of this Gospel if you're curious, even a little impatient! More to the point, this reminds us that the drama of *our* lives, are a lot like Act Two of a drama. Something happens to us; we're thrust into a circumstance not of our choice. And we struggle to cope.

Maybe it's as commonplace as getting married or making a career change. Maybe it's as heartbreaking as serious illness, abortion, or divorce. Perhaps it's the never-ending question of life's meaning, precipi-

tated by a loved one's death. Suddenly we're in over our heads. We seek the familiar and safe. We look for people and things we can rely on. If someone challenges our expectations we may be more bewildered and angry than exalted and energized!

That's especially true when we hear Jesus say, "*This* is the work of God: that you believe in the One whom he has sent. I am the bread of life. I am the bread God has sent down from heaven."

Believe. In English, the word is wimpy. "I believe" doesn't carry the sureness and solidity of "*I know.*" Martin Luther had it right, though: belief means hanging your heart on something. *Believing* means entrusting your whole self to someone worthy of trust. And even in the Act Twos of our life, we have grounds for *believing* in Jesus.

Look at the story of the Israelites in the wilderness. It was all about trust, not hunger. Hungry and miserable, they accused Moses of leading them into the desert to die. Beneath that accusation was another: "*God* snookered us. Why didn't he just kill us in Egypt?" Listen to God's response: "I am going to rain bread from heaven for you. In that way I will test them, *whether they will follow my instruction or not.*"

It wasn't about hunger, it was about trust. God gave them food for their *bodies* - let's not over-spiritualize the story. They'd have died

without it. But the *issue* was trust. Could God's people learn to trust God even when they were hungry, tired, and lost in the depths of Act Two? Could they trust that God would accomplish all things for good, even when from their perspective it seemed bad? Food for bodies became food for thought, trust, and faith. Could they digest it?

It's what Jesus provides, as well. Yes, he acted with compassion for a hungry crowd, and answers our prayers. So what? Do we turn Jesus into Santa Claus, fast-forwarding us through the grit and pain of life's Acts Two and Three into the comforting conclusion of Act Four? Or do we catch a glimpse of something deeper and greater?

Do we begin to trust that, even when we're hungry, discouraged, grieving, or overwhelmed by life, Jesus provides more than we need or dare to ask for? Do we see that bread and answers to prayers are given not only for their own sake but to kindle trust in the Giver?

Do we begin to believe - to hang our hearts - on the One who hung on a cross, giving his life's blood and his Spirit so that we might live through the deserts and dark valleys that confront and confound us? Do we learn to trust him enough to not waver when prayers go unanswered, roads seem endless, and bread seems no more than stones?

Stay tuned for Act Three - of our Gospel, and of our lives joined to this Jesus, upon whom God has set his seal. Amen.