

John 6:35, 41-51

Additional readings: 2 Samuel 18:5-9, 15, 31-33; Ephesians 4:25-5:2
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A few weeks ago we heard in Mark's gospel about Jesus returning to Nazareth to teach in the synagogue, and being met with disbelief and cynicism. The people who'd known Jesus since his boyhood, and knew his family, couldn't accept that he might have something to say to them that was of real importance, something that came from God.

Here, in John's gospel, we have a similar incident. This time Jesus isn't in Nazareth, but he's in Capernaum, the same part of the country, among people who know him and his family. The reaction is much the same. Familiarity is too great to overcome, and the people begin to criticize and complain. Who does this upstart think he is? He grew up here, just like the rest of us. How can he be from heaven? Where does he get the idea that he's better than us?

I'm taking a slight liberty there, because they don't literally say that Jesus considers himself better than them. But they're clearly thinking it. Just the fact that Jesus has come back after being away for a while, and has started teaching there, is enough to make them resentful. It's human nature to feel some hostility toward someone you've known all your life, who suddenly seems to be acting as though they're something special. It's also natural to resent someone who returns after an absence and grabs all the attention: Jesus made use of that human trait when he told the parable of the Prodigal Son.

But Jesus isn't there to build himself up at the expense of others, to make himself look important, or to impress people. He's there to tell them about the bread of life, and to help them restore a broken relationship with God.

Remember that this takes place the day after Jesus fed the crowd of five thousand. It's natural that the people's thoughts are running on material, everyday bread that they can eat to satisfy their physical hunger. That morning, finding that Jesus has left the place where the miraculous feeding occurred, the crowd crosses the water to Capernaum and catches up with Jesus there. Jesus is well aware that they followed him because they want more food, not because they're interested in his teaching. But there's an important lesson that he needs to share with them.

Bread was the staple food in Jesus' time, and so came to represent life, because it was so necessary to keep body and soul together. But as Jesus says, "Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died" (verse 49). Food is a necessary and good thing: it keeps us alive and gives us the strength we need; but it doesn't prevent our eventual death. Jesus has come to give us the food that will nourish us beyond the grave, and prepare us for eternal life.

Jesus makes some very bold, controversial, and even offensive claims as he speaks here to the people. And when John refers to those people as "the Jews", by the way, he means not Jews in general, but those who were antagonistic toward Jesus.

First, Jesus moves from talking about the bread of life as if it were an impersonal gift from God, to identifying it with himself. This bread isn't the spiritual equivalent of a loaf that you buy at the store. This bread is Jesus himself.

Next, Jesus goes a step further still. He is himself the bread, but more than that, he came from heaven. That's a huge claim. Jesus stops short, for now, of saying that he actually *is* God, but he's only one step away from it. He's saying that he was with God the Father in heaven, and that the Father sent him.

A third statement, very challenging indeed to his hearers, is that not only is Jesus the bread, but that those who believe in him must eat of him – actually eat his flesh. How literally he means this is a matter of interpretation.

No one ate Jesus' flesh when he was living as a man on earth, but he gave up his flesh – his body – to the world when he died on the cross.

Many people believe that the bread we receive at the Eucharist becomes the actual body of Jesus, and the wine becomes his blood, so that we really do consume him when we take communion. This is known as the doctrine of transubstantiation. Others believe that the Communion meal is a commemoration and that the bread and wine are symbols of Jesus' body and blood, but don't actually become the body and blood. To the Jews listening to Jesus' words, the idea of eating his flesh would be shocking in the extreme.

The message that Jesus is trying to get across is about the importance of spiritual food. We could express that in a different way by thinking of it as our relationship with God. We were made to be in relationship with God, just as we were made to be in relationship with other human beings. It's not good for a person to live alone – and by that I mean not just being the only occupant of our house or apartment, but having no companionship or friendship. Still more, it's not good for us to live apart from God.

If we want to know whether we're in relationship with God, we can take a look at our lives and give ourselves a spiritual health check. It's good if we come to church and take part in worship, but how we behave out in the world, or with our families, friends, coworkers, and the people we come across in daily life – that's the real test.

A couple of weeks ago we heard about King David's spectacular failure in his relationship with God. He saw a beautiful woman, Bathsheba, and determined to take her, despite the fact that she was married. Worse still, he took advantage of his position of power to have her husband killed so that he could marry her. It was only when the prophet Nathan confronted him that David recognized that he'd done wrong. But even though David confessed that he'd sinned, he did nothing to show that there was any real repentance.

God forgives sins when we confess and repent, but the repentance has to be genuine. That includes making amends as far as possible for the wrong we've done. Even then, often it's the case that wrong actions have consequences. Uriah, Bathsheba's husband, was still dead, whether David repented or not. And God told David through Nathan that there would be trouble from within his own house from that time on.

Some time has passed in the Old Testament reading we heard today, and that trouble has come to a head. David's son Absalom leads a rebellion against him, and David finds himself having to fight against his own people. He wins the battle, but Absalom gets caught in a tree while riding his mule, and is killed. Even though Absalom had turned against him, David is devastated by his death. The trouble that was prophesied, which arose out of David's turning away from God, has come upon him. It's not that God didn't forgive him, or that God punished him; but wrong actions lead to bad consequences.

Paul's words to the Ephesian Christians give us a model for how to live in right relationship with God. We're to be truthful, honest, kind and forgiving; and the things to avoid are bitterness, wrangling, slander and malice. You may have noted that Paul mentions anger twice: the first time he says that we *are* allowed to be angry, and the second time that we should put anger away from us. I think he's referring to two different things, although using the same word. There are situations that can rightfully make us angry: for instance, if we see injustice or violence being done to someone. At other times anger can be less righteous: when, for instance, it stems from a feeling that our ego has been bruised. In any case, Paul tells us not to let the sun go down on our anger, which is particularly good advice in our relationships with others.

Paul ends by telling us to “be imitators of God ... and live in love, as Christ loved us” (Ephesians 5:1-2). We can feed others physically through hospitality, through giving, perhaps by helping in the Food Pantry. We can feed others spiritually by loving them, by giving them our time, by bringing God's kingdom to them through our actions and the way we live our lives.

If we do that, we're imitating Jesus and fulfilling what God commands. And when we do, we're sharing generously of the Bread of Life.