

Sunday August 18th, 2024

John 6:47-58
“What Sustains You?”

At the trial, the judge asks her why she stole a can of peaches. She replies, "Your Honor, my husband and I don't have much, and we are very poor. I was simply trying to do something about my hunger." The judge, feeling sorry for the old lady, asked, "How many peaches were in the can?" "6," the old lady responded. "Then," the judge said, "you will spend one day in jail for each peach, for a total of 6 days." "Your Honor," spoke her husband, "she also stole a can of peas!"

I admit it. I am sure you will be shocked to learn looking at me that I enjoy eating food. Maybe most people also enjoy eating. I can also guess that at least some of you here today are like Laura and I, who nearly daily, wrestle with that most significant of questions, “What will we have for supper?” Which is often followed by an examination of what if any options we have on hand.

So, much of our life's experience and energy is spent in the pursuit and the enjoyment of food. This fixation on food is completely understandable given our need as living beings to ingest food to sustain our lives. If we go too long without food the consequences for our health and vitality are significant.

We have even coined a slang term to describe what happens to a great number of us when we go too long without food. Have you heard anyone describe a grouchy hungry person as being “hangry”. Young children are particularly prone to this after their blood sugar gets too low. After school snacks are essential for many kids to make it to supper time. Our personal need and connection to food helps us understand well what happened to the Israelites in the wilderness after they exited from Egypt.

Wandering around in that hot desolate place, they eventually got hungry. They got hungry and started to grumble at Moses and God. They got very “hangry”. They went so far as to suggest that God had led the Israelites out into the wilderness to starve to death. Denying the goodness of God is a form of blasphemy. There are also incidents when they got very thirsty, and they grumbled then as well. Things got so desperate that many of the Israelites suggested that they should go back to Egypt.

They might be slaves in Egypt but at least they had food and water. Moses reaches out to God and pleads for food. I think it is more to get them to stop grumbling than to feed them. Well God does send aid. He rains manna down and on one occasion he sends a huge flock of quail to feed them. God in his benevolence send down manna, as a sustaining grace. It is food that will at least tide the Israelites over until they reach the promised land.

All this plays into the scene being described in John 6 when Jesus used the term “bread of life.” Jesus was trying to get away from the crowds but to no avail. He had crossed the Sea of Galilee, and the crowd followed Him. After some time, Jesus inquires of Philip how they're going to feed the crowd. Philip's answer displays his “little faith” when he says they don't have enough money to give each of them the smallest morsel of food.

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Finally, Andrew brings to Jesus a boy who had five small loaves of bread and two fish. With that amount, Jesus miraculously fed the throng with lots of food to spare.

Afterward, Jesus and His disciples cross back to the other side of Galilee. When the crowd sees that Jesus has left, they follow Him again. Jesus takes this moment to teach them a lesson. He accuses the crowd of ignoring His miraculous signs and only following Him for the “free meal.” Jesus tells them in John 6:27, “Do not labor for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you. For on him, God the Father has set his seal.”

In other words, they were so enthralled with the food, they were missing out on the fact that their Messiah had come. So, the Jews ask Jesus for a sign that He was sent from God (as if the miraculous feeding and the walking across the water weren't enough). They tell Jesus that God gave them manna during the desert wandering. Jesus responds by telling them that they need to ask for the true bread from heaven that gives life. When they ask Jesus for this bread, Jesus startles them by saying, “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.”

This is a phenomenal statement! First, by equating Himself with bread, Jesus is saying he is *essential* for life. Second, the life Jesus is referring to is not physical life, but eternal life. Jesus is trying to get the Jews' thinking, from the physical realm and into the spiritual realm. He is contrasting what He brings as their Messiah, with the bread He miraculously created the day before. That was physical bread that perishes. He is spiritual bread that brings eternal life.

Third, and very important, Jesus is making another claim to deity. This statement is the first of the “I AM” statements in John's Gospel. The phrase “I AM” is the covenant name of God (Yahweh, or YHWH), revealed to Moses at the burning bush ([Exodus 3:14](#)). The phrase speaks of self-sufficient existence (or what theologians refer to as “*aseity*”), which is an attribute only God possesses. It is also a phrase the Jews who were listening would have automatically understood as a claim to deity.

Continuing in John 6 into today's passage, what would you think if I were to say to you today that Jesus is manna. Just like the food that sustained Israel both physically and spiritually in the wilderness. John 6:51 summarizes what Jesus has been saying since verse 32:

“I am the living bread that came down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die.” The death of which Jesus speaks was the death that threatened Israel under harsh conditions in the desert, and the separation from God represented by the sentiment that life in Egypt was preferable (see Exodus 16:3).

Manna was the solution God provided in that situation, and Jesus has been interpreting the scripture to identify himself as manna. Jesus clearly wants to draw a definite straight line from the wilderness story to his presence and his sustaining grace to all of us. Yet, there is something special about the manna Jesus is. Jesus extends his interpretation in a new way in these verses. He adds something profoundly new to this idea of manna sustaining life.

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The manna Jesus is, the life he gives, is “eternal”: “Whoever eats of this bread will live forever” (John 6:51). The phrase “live forever” (Greek: *zesei eis ton aiona*) is a variation of John’s more common words for the gift Jesus provides, eternal life (for example verse 54, *zoe aionion*). Throughout the Gospel of John, Jesus asserts that he is the bringer of eternal life for those who trust in him. The manna is already a story of God’s life-giving power. Jesus uses this opportunity to clarify that the life he brings as manna is this kind of life: it extends forever.

As is true elsewhere in the Gospel, this “life” Jesus brings is not limited to a future heavenly existence after death. Many modern Christians make this mistake in reading John’s Gospel. We are familiar with modern theological assertions that followers of Jesus go to heaven. In addition, the phrase “eternal life,” when used in the Synoptic Gospels, (Matthew, Mark and Luke) often refers to the resurrected life.

For example, Matthew’s parable of the separation of sheep and goats after the coming of the Son of Man closes with the statement, “And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life” (Matthew 25:46). Matthew clearly has in mind a life that is “eternal” because it is distinct from temporally bounded human existence (compare with Mark 10:30). We get this idea.

John has something different in mind with the phrase “eternal life.” This life is available to believers in the present and not only in the future. Jesus says, “those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life” (John 6:54) and “Very truly I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life” (John 6:47). The verbs are present tense. The life Jesus brings begins during the life of the believer and during Jesus’ own incarnate existence on earth.

In calling this life “eternal,” John communicates that the life Jesus offers is qualitatively different from regular human life. “Eternal” (or “forever”) is a characteristic that belongs only to the divine: “The Lord sits enthroned as king forever” (Psalm 29:10; Greek *eis ton aiona*); “The counsel of the Lord stands forever” (Psalm 32:11). It is God and God’s initiatives that properly possess this quality.

Those who trust in Jesus and “have eternal life” participate in this divine life even now. When Jesus later says, “I came that they might have life and have it abundantly” (John 10:10), he is saying something similar. Those who abide with him share in the creative force of the God who brought all things into being. This same life is embodied in Jesus (John 1:3-4).

John creates one contrast between Jesus and manna. The ancestors died in the wilderness, but those who eat of Jesus live forever (John 6:58). Modern readers should not see this as a rejection or criticism of the earlier bread God provided. The death of the first generation in the wilderness was not due to a defect in God’s manna but resulted from the idolatry of Israel. Jesus offers his manna and suggests that the same outcome will not occur.

“Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them” (John 6:56). Those who eat are offered a union with Christ that endures. Now I am sure working through this passage you are bound to start thinking about the Lord’s supper or communion.

And although communion experience is not explicitly mentioned here, readers are correct to identify these overtones. Maybe you would be surprised to learn that John's Gospel is distinctive in that it has no moment of the institution of the Lord's Supper (compare with Matthew 26:26-29).

In John's gospel at Jesus' last meal, the foot washing takes center stage (John 13:1-11). But these words in John 6 identify a future gift of eating and drinking Jesus' flesh and blood, which certainly would have evoked the Lord's supper for early Christian readers. These verses suggest that future meal is also a feeding on manna. Although the crowd introduced the manna story many verses ago, Jesus is still interpreting that quoted scripture, "he gave them bread from heaven to eat" (John 6:31).

In fact, his words in verse 51 introduce a second interpretation. In verse 32, Jesus initiated his first interpretation, stating that the manna was not simply a gift of the past, but was present even now. Verse 51 does something similar, only now Jesus initiates a second interpretation of the scripture, "he gave them bread from heaven to eat." He changes the subject "he" to "I," so that Jesus himself is the giver of the bread. He also renders the verb in the perfect tense, "I will give."

Collecting these statements in parallel may help us to see the relationship to verse 31. Here they are with the subject, verb, and direct object:

He gave them bread from heaven to eat. (John 6:31)

My father gives you the true bread from heaven. (John 6:32)

The bread I will give for the life of the world is my flesh. (John 6:51)

By interpreting the scripture verse in these ways, John suggests that Jesus' giving of his flesh and blood is a reiteration of the gift of bread from heaven. The future gift of bread, which Christian readers understand as the Lord's supper, is also manna.

This manna imagery is often discarded in modern celebrations of the Lord's supper in favor of sacrificial language. Drawing on John's understanding, communion prayers might emphasize the story of God's enduring care for Israel in the exodus story and invite those around the table to understand themselves as the recipients of this care. Those who receive Jesus' body and blood might imagine themselves as those same wilderness travelers, following God in the pillar of cloud and fire, and feeding on manna, which was all that sustained them.

John's theological imagination opens rich possibilities for growth in understanding of what it means to participate in this meal.

People sometimes tell me after officiating a wedding ceremony, "That was a very nice ceremony." Ceremonies (a formal act or set of acts performed as prescribed by ritual or custom) such as weddings are meant to be nice, but they are not intended to be an end in themselves. You and I know, and hopefully the bride and groom, that once the ceremony is over, life begins as a married couple. The ceremony has an intended purpose that lies beyond itself. In other words, there is life beyond the ceremony.

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Last week, although I was not present, this fellowship gathered to observe the Lord's Supper. It too can be a nice and quite meaningful ceremony. But like a wedding, these ceremonies are not intended to be an end in themselves. Communion celebrations also speak of life beyond the ceremony.

It would do little good, though perhaps some good, for a married couple to watch the video of their wedding ceremony if they never grasped the emphasis that they are to have a life together as husband and wife after the ceremony.

If there is anything the history of human religion tells us, it is that people seek to earn their way to heaven. This is such a basic human desire because God created us with eternity in mind. The Bible says God has placed [the desire for] eternity in our hearts ([Ecclesiastes 3:11](#)). The Bible also tells us that there is nothing we can do to earn our way to heaven because we've all sinned ([Romans 3:23](#)) and the only thing our sin earns us is death ([Romans 6:23](#)). There is no one who is righteous in himself ([Romans 3:10](#)).

Our dilemma is we have a desire we cannot fulfill, no matter what we do. That is where Jesus comes in. He, and He alone, can fulfill that desire in our hearts for righteousness through the Divine Transaction: "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" ([2 Corinthians 5:21](#)). When Christ died on the cross, He took the sins of mankind upon Himself and made atonement for them. When we place our faith in Him, our sins are imputed to Jesus, and His righteousness is imputed to us. Only Jesus satisfies our hunger and thirst for righteousness. Because He, and He alone, is our Bread of Life.