

Proper 16 (B)

Jn 6.56-69

Not long ago, I stood up here and told you we were going to spend the next several weeks exploring chapter six of the gospel of John. I also told you biblical scholars often refer to this section of John as the “bread of life discourse.” Today I’m here to tell you, at the risk of upsetting biblical scholars around the world, that’s not quite right: the conversation Jesus has with his disciples in chapter six of John isn’t really about bread at all.

To be fair, we have of course heard a lot about bread over the past month. We’ve heard that Jesus needed only five loaves of bread and a few fish to feed 5,000 hungry people, and afterwards there was still enough bread left over to fill twelve baskets. We’ve heard Jesus talk repeatedly about the bread that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world, and how this bread is different from the bread God gave to Israel in the wilderness. And we’ve heard Jesus say he himself is this bread, and the bread he gives for the world is his flesh.

So there is indeed a lot about bread in John six, but ultimately, of course, that’s not really the point: Jesus uses the image of bread to talk about something more important, something more essential to the life of faith.

Now, some of you may be expecting me to say that the theme or the argument that plays out underneath all this talk about bread has to do with the identity of Jesus himself. And, as with thinking about John six as the “bread of life discourse,” one might have good reasons for saying this: the question of the identity of Jesus, like the imagery of bread, is woven throughout the warp and weft of this chapter of John.

Earlier in this same chapter, the crowds identify Jesus as the “prophet who is to come into the world,” and they want to make him a king. But Jesus rejects both of those identities, and proceeds to provide a third. He describes himself in terms that at first confuse and then anger the people: he is the Son of Man, the one who has come down from heaven, sent by the Father to do the Father’s will, the one who has the gift of eternal life and who will raise up all those who believe in him.

That’s a little more than the crowds are willing to accept, but when they get upset Jesus doesn’t back off: he goes even further. “What if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before?” Jesus pushes the question of his identity to the absolute limit, and the crowds don’t like it.

But as with bread, despite all this talk about the identity of Jesus I’m still not sure it’s entirely accurate to say *that’s* the issue or the question at the heart of John six: there’s something even more fundamental at stake in all of this. All the different images and conversations and controversies in this chapter are ultimately about one thing: life, real life, eternal life. What is it, and how do we get it? Here we’re on familiar ground: the question of life is one of the principal concerns, not only of the sixth chapter of John, but of the whole gospel.

If you read through all of John, you'll find this theme keeps cropping up. We first see it as early as chapter one, when the gospel writer tells us it is through the Word that all things came into being, and in the Word is life (1.3-4). We see it again in the conversation Jesus has with the Pharisee Nicodemus, during which Jesus says God so loved the world that he gave his only Son so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life (3.16). We see it again in the conversation Jesus has with a Samaritan woman at Jacob's well, when Jesus says to her the water he can give her will become a spring "gushing up to eternal life" (4.14). We see it again in the encounter between Jesus and Martha, the sister of Lazarus, when Jesus says to her that he is "the resurrection and the life" (11.25).

In some respects, it's not too much to say the question of life is one of the organizing themes John uses to present the ministry of Jesus: in other words, life is John's point. Indeed, the gospel writer himself says so, towards the very end of the gospel: he writes, "Jesus did a lot of other stuff I haven't recorded, but what I did record has been written down 'so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the messiah ... and that through believing you may have life' (20.30-31)."

Now, how does this help us make sense of what's going on in today's gospel? Having now come to the end of John six, we see two responses to the words Jesus speaks, two responses to the life he offers. We see one response in the crowds who decide they've had enough, and turn back from following Jesus. We see the other response in those disciples who decide they have nowhere else to go and who recommit themselves to following Jesus.

These two responses are representative of two kinds of life. The first response—the response of the crowds—involves choosing a life of *independence*. The second response—the response of the disciples—involves choosing a life of absolute *dependence*. These two kinds of life are marked by different practices, and they lead to very different outcomes.

A life of independence is governed by a longing for freedom; I don't say it's governed *by* freedom because in fact a life of independence does not lead to freedom but to bondage. The one committed to independence *longs* for freedom and believes the way to freedom is the exercise of one's own will. Ultimately, however, this leads not to life but to death. And so the one committed to independence is restless, never satisfied, always looking to break out of some perceived limitation or to get beyond some imagined horizon, only to find when they do so they're right back where they started.

On the other hand, a life of absolute dependence is governed by obedience. That's not a very popular word in today's culture, but it's one of the principal virtues at the heart of a life grounded in dependence on God. Those who recognize their dependence will strive to order their lives around the practice of quietness, stillness, attentiveness, and patience. And the irony here, of course, is that obedience—what looks to us to be the *loss* of freedom—ends up being the only reliable path to *true* freedom and to real life.

Those disciples who turn back from following Jesus do so because they recognize what's he's asking them: he wants their whole life, he wants to take what they think of as freedom and turn it in another direction. When faced with the choice of either continuing to live the life they knew—the life they were familiar with, the life they could to some degree predict and control—

or following Jesus along a new and uncertain and demanding path, they chose to stick with what they knew. They wanted to keep their own life, rather than depend on *him* for their life.

Peter and the rest of the twelve respond differently; they recognize Jesus as the one who has the words of eternal life. So they stay: they abide, they listen, they attend to where their Lord and master calls them, and then they follow. As stubborn and foolish and faithless as they are, they try to be obedient. And because they do, they find themselves living in the one who is himself light and life.

The difference between the life of the flesh—the way that leads to death—and the life of the spirit—the way that leads to eternal life—has everything to do with that mystifying question Jesus asks the crowds: “What if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before?” The image of the Son of Man ascending is about glorification and exaltation; when the Son of Man ascends, he does so because he is the one to whom God has given all honor and all power and all authority.

This glorification, this sovereignty is manifest in the lives of those who live in absolute dependence on Jesus. When we follow in obedience—when we abide with him, when we are attentive to his words, when we commit ourselves to doing his will—his majesty is revealed in us. Just as his life was a revelation of the glory and honor of the Father, so too our lives can be a revelation of his honor and glory. In the eyes of the world, this looks like foolishness: how can a path marked by humility and obedience lead to freedom and glory? That is not a new question, and the fact people keep asking it is an indicator they have not yet grasped the truth of the life Jesus offers.

So the question before us this day—and, indeed, every day—is the same one Jesus asked of the twelve: “You gonna go, or you gonna stay?” This is the same question Joshua put before the people of Israel: “Choose this day who you will serve: you can choose the Lord, or you can choose the gods of the people who live around you, or you can choose some other gods. But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord, we will be obedient to the Lord.”

This is not a question we answer once and then never have to think about again; it’s a question with which we are faced every day, every hour, every moment we are conscious of having a choice of any kind.

Because ultimately, all our choices boil down to one choice: who we serve, to whom we are obedient. Hear now the word of the Lord as spoken by his servant, Joshua: “Revere the Lord, and serve him in sincerity and faithfulness; put away all foreign gods from among you and the gods of the people who live around you, and serve the Lord.” For in him is light and life, and his life is the life of the world.

One final thing: you’re going to see something a little different over the next couple of weeks. Over the next few Sundays, we’re going to have an opportunity to think further about the question of whom we will serve, not only as individuals but as a community.

You’ve heard me talk several times about a program that’s coming to Trinity next month called

RenewalWorks. You've seen this program mentioned in the bulletin, and you'll find an article about this program in the next issue of *Connections*.

RenewalWorks is designed to help us discern how we as a community of faith are going to answer the question of whom we will serve. Over the next few weeks, you're going to hear the Dean and I talking about RenewalWorks and all we hope it will help us accomplish as a community of faith eager to serve our Lord and go where he calls us.

As we prepare to embark on this work, I ask you to continue to think and pray about how your experience here at Trinity helps you grow in the life of faith. How does being here help you be more obedient to the call to follow Jesus? We're going to be talking about that a lot in the weeks ahead, and there's no better way to prepare for that conversation than to be reminded that the one who longs to meet us here today is none other than the Holy One of God, the one who has the words of eternal life.

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