

Heavenly Bread

John 6:35, 41-51

If you were to come to my house and rummage around in the drawers of my kitchen island, what you would find is a ridiculous quantity and variety of bread; drawers and drawers of it. Enough probably to feed supper to the inhabitants of a small island republic.

It hasn't always been like that. Before my kids went off to elementary school all they'd ever had was multi-grain; they didn't even know that white bread existed. But once they discovered that there was bread out there that was so soft and insubstantial that you didn't even have to chew it, the battles began. White *versus* wheat eventually became white *plus* wheat as parental fatigue began to trump the degree in nutrition. Then somewhere along the line Drew discovered that the humble sandwich could be made far more interesting if you make it on a Hoagie roll, and Beth decided that, while sliced bread was fine for sandwiches, bagels were the bread of choice at breakfast. Thankfully, our kitchen is big enough to accommodate it all.

Ours is not the first bread war, of course. In many ways we have been fighting over bread since the dawn of time – either bread or cake; basic needs or extravagances, the right to exist vs. the thirst for power. And with today's reading, a meal of bread, followed by a conversation about bread, turns into a fight about bread. Remember all those people who were fed by Jesus, some 5,000 of them? And all those people who got in their boats and rowed their way back and forth across the Sea of Galilee, looking for Jesus and his amazing bread act? Remember how eager they were to see him, to hear him, to have him heal their diseases and tell them about the kingdom of God? Today they part company. Today Jesus begins to lose his shine, his charisma, and the crowd will thin dramatically. Some will find his words difficult and confusing, some will find them difficult and offensive, and some, a few, will find them difficult, but true.

You'll remember that we've been following the gospel of Mark in the lectionary this year, and even though the story of the feeding of the 5,000 is found in Mark, the lectionary has us jump to John's gospel for it. That's because in Mark, it's an isolated event. A stand-alone miracle, like many of Jesus' other miracles. But in John, it's a jumping-off point; Jesus uses it as an opportunity to talk about who he is. He gives them bread, then tells them not to be satisfied with the bread *he* gives them when they could have the bread that *God* gives, bread that will satisfy them forever. They say, 'sure, give us that bread, too,' and he tells them that he is that bread, the bread of life; bread that has come down from heaven, sent, given by God. He doesn't come outright and say that he *is* God, but he comes close enough. Not even Moses said that he came from heaven or was sent by God. What Jesus has just said about himself was something no one had ever said before, and in the hearts and minds of many of his hearers, it was blasphemy. They were perfectly willing to eat bread from his hand, to have their diseases healed and his teachings stimulate and encourage them, but this, this was too much. He had gone too far. The battle lines had been drawn.

Now here's the temptation. The temptation is for us to assume that there is a nice, neat, tidy battle line with two distinct sides. The Jews are on one side, and remember in John that isn't an ethnic identification; it's what he calls those who oppose Jesus, mostly the religious authorities, and the disciples are on the other. The good guys vs. the bad guys. But there are really three

distinct groups, and what I'd like to suggest is that the lines aren't as neatly drawn as you think. As we hope. First, there are those who, from the outset, seem to oppose Jesus; the ones John calls 'the Jews.' Then there are the disciples, but as you'll see in another week or two, what Jesus has just said about himself is too much even for some of his followers. The bread, the miracles, the teachings, great, bring 'em on, but they can't accept everything he says, and some of them turn back. And some stay. A few. Us, right?

That's the temptation. To say this was, and is, an us-against-them battle. They don't believe, we do. They are his enemies, we are his friends. They ultimately rejected him, we followed him. Right? But here's what I keep coming back to: if that was true, why did John write about it? Why did he think it was something we needed to know about, if it had nothing to do with us?

I don't think it's that simple. I'm not convinced those lines are as neatly drawn as we would like to think that they are.

Look back at the story. Ask yourself the question, how did this happen? How did that battle line get drawn? How is it that some could accept, not just his bread, but his words? What distinguishes those who find his words difficult, and those who find them too difficult?

And now think back to the words of the Jews. How can he be from heaven? Isn't this Mary and Joseph's boy? Didn't he used to do carpentry? How can he say he's from heaven when we all know he's from Nazareth, lived there since he was a little kid?

They're stuck. The folks who have such difficulty believing are the ones who come with a lot of certainties about how things are. They know a lot of things with complete certainty, like that people from Nazareth are regular, ordinary folks, mostly blue collar, not well educated, and maybe they were born somewhere else, say, Bethlehem, but carpenters from Nazareth with clearly documented lineage were carpenters from Nazareth, not bread from heaven. They know their biblical facts, backwards and forwards, they know how God had acted in the past, and would certainly continue to act in the future. They know beyond a shadow of a doubt what God promised them, expected of them, required of them. They had become rigid and dogmatic in their thinking and their doing. In their world of order and rules and facts, they had lost wonder, the ability to listen, to imagine, or at least to imagine that God imagined. They had lost their openness and flexibility. And they had forgotten all about God's wild past, and assumed that he had settled into a dull, predictable, docile old deity.

And the disciples? Actually we know less about them, but maybe the fact that they were willing to hop out of their boats and walk away from good jobs to follow Jesus says something about their openness to God's work in the world, no matter how unlikely or risky it was. They weren't so stuck in their traditions, or their schooling, or their certainties about God and the world and religion that they couldn't gulp hard when Jesus said, "I am the bread of heaven," and agree that it might just be true.

It might not be the metaphor we would use, and it's as great a mystery to us today as it was then, how Jesus could be bread, but at least it doesn't cause us heartburn anymore. We are used to Jesus saying things like this now. I am the bread of heaven, the Good Shepherd, the Gate. In

that battle we are firmly on the side of the good guys. Mostly. It's still a little hard to get our heads around.

But in other battles, and there are other battles, the lines aren't as clear, are they? See, that wasn't the last time God said something difficult or challenging. Between the fact that God is gracious and merciful – to everyone – and that God copes with change a lot better than we do, God tends to come out with things we find off-putting all the time. Also, God has a much greater sense of fun and adventure than we do. And here we come along, with a whole lot of knowledge about the world – the universe – and 2,000 years of doing Church under our belt, not to mention a strong need for stability in life, and suddenly we aren't always on the side of the good guys anymore. We can be so full of certainty about the way things are, about the way God is, that God's words to us fall on deaf ears. Hardened ears.

One of my favorite preachers and authors, Barbara Brown Taylor, wrote a book a few years back called, *When God is Silent*. In it she suggests that God has grown frustrated with us and has withdrawn, waiting for us to come to our senses and come back to him. I'm not so sure that I agree with her on this one. I think God talks to us all the time. I think we just can't, or don't, hear it because what God is proposing is so outside the boundaries of our thinking that we can't go there.

And you'll notice that I haven't been at all specific about what God might be saying to us. I haven't said that God is trying to say something, maybe something new and difficult, about the church today, or our nation, or about your own life. And that has been intentional. Exactly what God is saying and to whom isn't the point. The point is our receptiveness. Our openness. To whatever God is telling us on any subject.

God never did settle down and become a dull, predictable, grey-headed old deity. God is as full of adventure and mischief as always. God's imagination about what *could be* has never dimmed. Has ours?