

Is Seeing Really Believing?

John 6.35-51

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Introduction to the Morning Lesson

Today and for the next two Sundays I'm going to be preaching on the lectionary's gospel readings all of which come from the sixth chapter of John's Gospel. In John 6 we encounter some of the most complicated teaching in the New Testament. So these sermons will depend not just on me but on you doing some work. I hope all of you will read John 6 this afternoon and before coming to church next Sunday and again the Sunday after. For preaching requires not just prepared speaking. It also requires prepared hearing. So you need to do your part.

The lectionary readings are all selected from the last half of chapter 6 but depend specifically on the first 14 verses which is John's version of Jesus feeding the 5,000 with just a little bread and a few fish. The feeding of the 5,000 is the only miracle recorded in all four gospels. When we realize that even the Christmas story isn't in all the gospels, we better pay attention when Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John all write about the same thing. We won't read today the verses about the miracle but we need to keep it in mind.

Now when I read the text I want you to pay particular attention to two things. First, notice the phrase that "the Jews began to complain about [Jesus]." John's Gospel frequently uses the term "the Jews" and it's always in a pejorative way. Down through the centuries that phrase has often fueled the flames of anti-Semitism with disastrous consequences for both Jews and Christians. Certainly in the Gospel's historical context, Christians were often beset by and besetting to Jewish authorities. But if we harden that historical setting into concrete, we are cementing ourselves into sin and bigotry.

For we most easily misunderstand scripture when we always read ourselves into the text as the "good guys," the people who are on God's side, or the ones who are faithful. Of course, by that reading, others are then the "bad guys" — Jews, sinners, nasty people, folks who aren't like us. But we ought not to read the Bible that way and a careful reading of this text helps us understand why. The Jews who complained are really the same people with whom Jesus is dealing all through chapter 6.¹ They are the 5,000 who were fed with five barley loaves and two fish. They are the large crowd who kept following him. (John 6.2) They are same people who, after the miracle feeding, witnessed out loud that "[Jesus] is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world." (John 6.14) And they are the same people who grumbled about Jesus' teaching because they found it hard.

In other words, they are we. We follow Jesus. We witness to Jesus. And we grumble when his teaching rubs us the wrong way. It rubs us wrong because his teaching is hard and if we follow it, it will never let us get comfortable. So when the text tells us

¹ Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St. John*, vol. 2, trans. Cecily Hastings, et al. (New York: Crossroad, 1990) 49.

that the Jews complained, read yourself and I'll read myself into those words.

The second thing to notice is how repetitive the text is. We are told at least six times that Jesus will raise up the faithful at the last day. In other words, he is the source of eternal life. Then we are told at least eight times that what Jesus does is entirely dependent on God the Father. Even those who follow Jesus can only do so if God empowers them. All this redundancy is there because the point of the story isn't information.² If the point were information, we could read it once and have it. Jesus is hammering away at us to make an impression, not make an impression, and he'll keep hammering until we get it. So this may be one of the things that rubs us wrong. For we like to think that we're in control. Remember we talked about that a couple of Sundays ago. We like to think that we have faith in God, that we get to decide and do and act. But this text challenges that because it's mostly theological, not behavioral. It's challenging us to see God in Jesus and Jesus in God in a new way. Let's read it in John 6.

John 6.35-51 (NRSV)

Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe. Everything that the Father gives me will come to me, and anyone who comes to me I will never drive away; for I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. This is indeed the will of my Father, that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day."

Then the Jews began to complain about him because he said, "I am the bread that came down from heaven." They were saying, "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, 'I have come down from heaven?'" Jesus answered them, "Do not complain among yourselves. No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me; and I will raise that person up on the last day. It is written in the prophets, 'And they shall all be taught by God.' Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me. Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father. Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."

Introduction

We often hear today, "what you see is what you get." It means nothing is hidden or below the surface. Appearance is reality and the phrase may be just a hipper version of the

² Donald Juell writing in *The Lectionary Commentary*. Roger E. Van Harn, ed., *The Lectionary Commentary: Theological Exegesis for Sunday's Texts, The Third Readings (Gospels)* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2001) 512.

old standard “seeing is believing.” We know seeing is important. Think how much our legal system is based on **eyewitnesses** or even how much science is based on **observation**. It’s hard to trust or believe or even know something we can’t see.

Let’s not forget the biblical precedent near the end of John’s Gospel. Remember that our friend, Thomas the Doubter, wasn’t with the disciples when they first saw the resurrected Jesus. When they told Thomas that they had seen the Lord, he famously replied, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands ... I will not believe.” Later, when he saw Jesus, he did believe. But then the Lord said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” (John 20.24-29)

So is seeing really believing? John’s Gospel seems to suggest maybe not. Maybe we need to believe in order to see. So here are a couple of questions to help us grapple with that today.

ONE: What do we really need?

First, what do we really need? Jesus said, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” He was talking about what we really need. We need to take him into our lives — literally ingest him — so that we will never be hungry or thirsty again. But do we know, or maybe better, do we live in a way that shows that Jesus is what we really need?

There are a lot of different ways to describe what we need. We obviously need food and in terms of food, most nutritionists talk about eating a balanced diet from the five basic food groups:

- Bread and pasta: 6-11 servings per day;
- Vegetables: 3-5 servings per day;
- Fruit: 2-3 servings;
- Milk and cheese: 2-3 servings;
- Meat, fish, and eggs: 2-3 servings.

Of course, you may have read somewhere that men, especially those under 40, like to simplify the food groups into four: sugar, salt, grease, and, depending on your outlook, either chocolate or beer — sometimes both! Increasing age and expanding waistlines may make us a little smarter about what we eat. Maybe.

We obviously need food to live. What else do we need? Perhaps the best description of human need came from Abraham Maslow (1908-1970), the famous American psychologist of the last century. In his research, Maslow documented that some needs cannot be met until other needs are taken care of. So he developed what he called the “Hierarchy of Needs.”³ There are five levels in what is usually diagrammed as a need pyramid.

³ See Abraham H. Maslow, *Motivation and Personality*, 3rd. ed., (Boston: Addison-Wesley, 1987) and also a helpful article by C. George Boeree, online, <http://www.ship.edu/~cgboeree/maslow.html>, Internet, 7 Aug. 2003.

Maslow said at the bottom of the need-pyramid are **physiological needs**. These include oxygen, water, protein, salt, sugar, calcium, proper pH balance, and the right body temperature. He also said we need activity, rest, sleep, waste removal, avoidance of pain, and sex. (But that's a sermon for another day.)

The next storey of the need-pyramid is **safety and security needs**. If our physiological needs are met, we are increasingly concerned about safe circumstances, stability, protection, and order.

Next higher up are **love and belonging needs**. If we are physically satisfied and safe, we begin to feel the need for friends, a sweetheart, children, affectionate relationships, and even a sense of community. So we tend to marry, have a family, join a church or a club, and find a job that is more than just earning money. We want to belong somewhere.

Then come **esteem needs**. Maslow said we need both self-esteem and the respect of others. He felt that not meeting these needs was the root of many, maybe most, of our psychological problems.

All of these levels Maslow called **deficit needs**. If you don't have enough of something, you have a deficit and feel the need. But when you get all you need, you feel nothing at all. As the old blues song goes, "you don't miss your water till your well runs dry!"⁴

Then there is a fifth level of need which Maslow called **self-actualization**. These are needs to, as the Army says, "be all that you can be," to fulfill your destiny, to be the fullest "you" possible. But this is a need we can hardly begin to address if our deficit needs have not been satisfied to a significant degree.

Maslow's theories make a lot of sense and are generally well regarded. But what if all our needs are met? What if we've met all or most of our deficit needs? What if we've even begun to meet our need for self-actualization and fulfillment? Do we still really need anything?

Jesus would say "Yes! You need me. You need God." That's why the text said eight times that we only come to Jesus by virtue of what the Father is doing. We have built into us a "God-hunger" and that need can only be satisfied by the bread come down from heaven. Until we have fed on Jesus, until we have ingested the nourishment of his body and blood, we have not satisfied our real need. What do we really need? We need God.

TWO: Do we really know our need?

So a second question needs to be asked. Do we really know our need? Do we really know how hungry we are for God and do we really seek the only food that can satisfy us?

Asking this makes us realize how hard Jesus' teaching is. When he taught that he was the true bread come down from heaven, the Jews — you and me — began to complain. "Isn't this just Jesus from the carpenter shop?" "Don't we know his mom and dad?" In other words, the complaints were expressing the notion that what you see is what you get. Jesus looked like an ordinary person. Ah, he did some amazing things with those five barley loaves and two fish. But maybe all that food really came from snacks the

⁴ Boeree.

5,000 had in their daypacks. In other words, we can *see* Jesus. But it's a whole different matter *believe* him.

"Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." Friends, in a very true sense, believing comes before seeing.

All of which points out the biggest danger for the church, this church, any church, or the church in general. If we look through the lens of "what you see is what you get," then the church is not much more than a religious club. Some clubs are bigger and fancier than others but all clubs are the same. They have a place. They have officers and rules. They have dues (churches call them tithes and offerings). Some clubs have chaplains. Most have songs and slogans and rituals. And we come to our clubs, religious and otherwise, to meet our needs.

Is our church just a religious club? We do meet our needs here. Even our physiological needs are met when we feed ourselves. We like the church to give us stability and order to meet our safety and security needs. Certainly our love and belonging needs are met here as well as our need for self-esteem and respect from others. Maybe to some extent we even self-actualize and fulfill ourselves here.

But what about our hunger for God? Is there more going on here than what we can see? Or is this all we get? Do we really come here so starving for God, so weak from hunger for the divine that we can barely crawl up steps to get to our places? And if we do come here famished only for the bread come down from heaven, will we find it?

I've always worried that the church — this church or any church — might be like the little mall I used to drive by on my way to work. For months and months the mall's big display sign announced a grocery store. But if you turned into the parking lot, there was no grocery to be found. You could see the sign and it promised food but there was no bread there. That's always the danger for the church. Does the real bread from heaven come down here and do we believe it enough to see it? It depends on whether we know what we really need.

Conclusion

I'll close today just by noting that if believing in Jesus were easy, we wouldn't need to be here at all. We could come once or twice and that would be it. That happens to people. They get a snack of religion when they're kids and then never notice again their real hunger. So the text repeats again and again that only Jesus lifts up believers to eternal life and believers can only come to Jesus when they know their real need is for God. The text is so repetitive that we might wonder why can't people get it. How many times does Jesus need to say something before we get it?

We don't get it because the teaching is hard and it is not just about understanding the ideas or gaining information. Our problem is more like bondage (being "slaves to sin" is a big theme in John 8) or blindness (the theme in John 9). If we are enslaved to sin, telling ourselves to stop sinning does no good. We need to be freed. If we are blind, we are not helped by blame or advice on how to see. We need to be healed. If we aren't

liberated and healed, we will always grumble about what Jesus said⁵ and end up just taking part in our club's activities, if we do even that much.

It's hard to believe that Jesus demands so much. One student who was studying this passage in class said, "I'm not comfortable with a God like this?"⁶ As if our comfort were of much concern to God. It isn't easy to admit it but what God is really concerned about is our hunger. Do we believe that our real hunger is for the bread come down from heaven? Only if we believe that, can we start to see that truly Jesus is the gift of life, the bread come down from heaven, to feed us what we really need.

⁵ Juel, 513.

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