

Proper 13 (B)

Jn 6.24-35

This is going to be what you might call an equal-opportunity sermon, by which I mean there's going to be something in here to offend just about everybody. I think these days people call that a "trigger warning."

I'm going to start by suggesting you pay close attention to our gospel lessons over the next several weeks. For the last few months we've been working our way through Mark's gospel, but now we suddenly find ourselves stumbling into the sixth chapter of John. And we're going to be here for a while: we'll be hearing stories from chapter six of John for the whole month of August, and then come September we'll go back to Mark.

So one potentially helpful spiritual discipline you may want to practice for the rest of this month would be to set aside time each week to read through all of chapter six of John. If you do that several times over the next month, you'll not only be able to keep track of what's going on in our gospel lessons each week, you'll also see there's more to this chapter than meets the eye.

So here we go: John, chapter six. Biblical scholars refer to this section of John's gospel as the "bread of life discourse." A discourse, of course, is a conversation, and most of chapter six of John is taken up with a conversation between Jesus and a crowd of people who want to call themselves his disciples.

Throughout this conversation, Jesus says some things that sound very nice. He says, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him who he has sent." That sounds fairly nice. He says, "The bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." That sounds pretty good, too. He says, "Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." That sounds positively heartwarming. We heard him say all of those things today, and over the next several weeks we'll hear him say many more such nice things.

But here's the thing: these pithy little sayings didn't sound nice to any of the people who first heard Jesus say them. In fact, the more he says, the more upset they become. At the beginning of chapter six of John, the crowds are happy to have found Jesus and can't wait to see what he's going to do next. By the end of chapter six of John, most of them are angry and ready to desert him.

The trouble begins in that portion of John six that we heard this morning. In particular, the trouble begins when Jesus says to the crowds, "Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me not because you saw signs but because you ate your fill of the loaves."

You remember what happened last week: crowds of people following Jesus around, suddenly it's dinner time and nobody remembered to bring anything to eat, so Jesus provides enough food for the lot of them using only five barley loaves and a few fish. The people see this, and they say, "This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world." In fact, they're so excited they want to make Jesus king, by force if necessary. But Jesus is having none of that, so he withdraws.

And now, in today's gospel, it's the next day, and the crowds have been searching for him. But Jesus, it seems, isn't exactly thrilled when they finally find him. A few weeks ago, we heard that when Jesus saw the crowds, harassed and helpless as they were, like sheep without a shepherd, he had compassion for them.

Today, however, it's a rather different story: today it seems Jesus is feeling more than a little testy. "Very truly, I tell you," he says, "you are looking for me not because you want to be my disciples, you are looking for me not because you truly believe or even understand the signs you have seen, you are looking for me not for any of the reasons why you *should* be looking for me...you are looking for me because you ate your fill." And it goes downhill from here.

Jesus does two things in chapter six of John that really irritate the crowds. The first thing he does is challenge the way they think about themselves. The second thing he does is challenge the way they think about him. They're not ready for either of these.

Jesus challenged the way the people thought about themselves by showing them they hadn't really thought through their motives for wanting to follow him. They were happy to be his disciples so long as following him meant getting a free meal and being able to go to him any time they wanted with whatever problem happened to come into their heads. But they weren't really the insightful, faithful, dedicated people they thought they were, and Jesus says so.

Jesus challenged the way the people thought about him by showing them he wasn't really who they wanted him to be. "Rabbi, do this for us; Rabbi, do that for us." And he did, so often in fact that they decided it would be a good idea if he were made king. What could be better than having a king who could heal people on demand and magically produce copious amounts of food? He had become their Miraculous Mr. Fix-It. But that's not who he really is.

Now, here's the real challenge: these two issues are connected. By forcing them to rethink who *he* was, Jesus forced the people to rethink who *they* were. In effect, what he told them to do was to define themselves in light of him, not to define him in light of themselves. It's as if he said, "You've got it backwards; you're using *yourself* as the point of reference for thinking about *me*, but you should be using *me* as the point of reference for thinking about yourself."

It's one thing if we can make up our minds about who we are and then go to God with an agenda, a clear sense of our hopes and dreams and aspirations...even our fears. But it's another thing entirely if God asks us to forget about whatever *we* may think about ourselves—to forget about our hopes, our dreams, our aspirations, and even our fears—and instead learn to think about ourselves only in light of what *he* shows us about who we are. We would rather enjoy the luxury of being able to define our own identity, but Jesus asks us to put that aside and to be the people *he* says we are rather than the people *we* say we are.

I often hear people say things like, "I want a faith that works in the real world. I don't need a theoretical faith, I need a practical faith. I need a faith that I can apply to the challenges and the problems of my everyday life." If you find yourself thinking that way, be careful: it may be that you're looking for Jesus, not because you have seen signs, but because you ate your fill and you want some more.

It's enormously tempting to try and turn Christian faith into a program for successful living. We want a faith we can apply to our jobs, we want a faith we can apply to our families, we want a faith we can apply to the social and political problems of the day, we want a faith we can apply to our own sense of well-being and our purpose in life, we want a faith that helps us make sense of the confusion and the tragedies of our lives.

Now, don't hear what I'm not saying: I'm *not* saying real faith doesn't have anything to do with those things. It has *everything* to do with those things. But we will run into problems when we try to define those things ourselves, and then try and figure out how to make the faith conform to our expectations. When we do that, we'll have a hard time figuring out what to do with the Bible, or what to do with the teachings and the practice of the church, or what to do with the demands of Christian fellowship, or what to do with prayer, because all those things seem so very remote and ineffective when it comes to the standards and expectations of the world.

Because as strange and as remarkable as it may sound, *this* is the real world. If what Jesus says is true, then he is the standard by which we need to measure every other dimension of our lives. If what he says is true, then the real world is not out there, it's in here. What we're doing here this morning is more like the real world than just about everything else that happens to us over the course of the week. There's more reality in the celebration of the Eucharist than there is in many of the activities we spend most of our time doing.

At least, that's what this is *supposed* to be like: life in the church is supposed to be a reminder of what's truly important, a few hours of reality before we walk out these doors and go back to the world of illusion and misdirection. The church is meant to be an outpost of reality in the midst of a world caught in the grip of a number of very powerful fantasies. If it's not that—if it doesn't feel like that—we may need to ask ourselves, both as individuals and as a community, if perhaps we're here today to tell Jesus what we expect from him rather than waiting to hear what he expects of us.

It's absolutely essential that we understand why Jesus said the things he did to the crowds, and the things we'll hear him say over the next several weeks. Jesus didn't force the crowds to rethink everything they thought they knew because he was on some kind of power trip. He forced them to rethink everything they thought they knew because he's the only one who had what they really needed, and he knew it. "I am the bread of life," he tells them. "Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

The same is true for us today. If we come to Jesus expecting him to accommodate himself to our agendas, he's going to say to us, "You are here for the wrong reason, and you need to rethink what this is about." But when we listen to what he has to tell us about himself, and about us, and about this world, we will find that he himself is indeed the bread that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world; he himself is the way, the truth, and the life, not just for us but for the whole world, the one in whom all things live and move and have their being.

When you come forward this day to receive the bread he offers to you, the bread that is himself, ask him for the grace to let go of whatever illusions you may have about him and whatever illusions you have about yourself, and ask him for the grace to see him as he really is and to see

yourself as you really are, to see yourself in him. It won't happen all at once, but if you are faithful to what he shows you then you will find your life sustained by the true bread that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world, and your life will be a living sacrifice to the honor and glory of his Name. Amen.

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