

## I Am The Bread of Life: Meditations on John 6 (Week One)

*The sixth chapter of John's Gospel is an outline of John's Eucharistic theology.* As such, it is one of the most carefully crafted chapters in the whole Bible. In fact, the lectionary devotes five weeks in a row to this single chapter beginning today. Because we have five weeks to ponder this text, the good news for all of you on this summer day is that I don't feel compelled to try to say it all today; I'm going to pace myself! In fact, all that I want to do this weekend is outline the broad theme here and notice a few details with you that seem important to John, pointing the way forward as a kind of preview of what is to come during the month of August.

The whole thing is held together by a key claim: *Jesus is the Bread of Life.* Now as soon as I say those words, each of you here today begins to filter them through your formative experiences. If you were raised in the Roman Catholic (or an Anglo-Catholic) Church, then you may hear echoes of the doctrine of transubstantiation. Jesus is really, truly, *literally* the Body of Christ. Or more precisely, when we take the host and bless it and break it and share it, then Christ is really present among us. For those raised as Protestants on the other hand (or on the Protestant end of the Episcopal Church), then you may find yourself going in exactly the opposite direction: wait a second, you say; Jesus is clearly speaking metaphorically here and is not literally bread, and bread isn't literally his body. We do this "to remember him."

But when we do that we are getting ahead of ourselves. Now Episcopal theology tends to be pretty broad and let me say at the outset that you are all right! There is plenty of room for high Catholics and low Protestants at the same Table. But if we aren't careful we may find ourselves getting stuck in the Eucharistic debates of sixteenth-century Europe. It isn't that those debates are unimportant, but it seems to me that we've gotten stuck there, and the way forward is actually found when we go back further—back to the roots of Scripture and the experience of the early Church. And one of the key places to begin is with the sixth chapter of John because it gives us a window into how those early Christians thought about these questions.

So the sixth chapter of John gives us a chance to reflect on what we do here every week when we gather to break the bread and share the cup. We begin with the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand, which is one of the few episodes found in all four gospels. That suggests that this miracle story occupied a central place in the oral tradition about Jesus in those first decades after the resurrection. This story appears in all four gospels and with rather remarkable congruence.

Even so, there are some interesting differences. In the synoptic gospels, for example, the *disciples* distribute the bread to the crowd: it is if Jesus is training them for ministry, teaching them how to be servant-leaders. That's a powerful message. But in John's Gospel, Jesus himself gives the bread, the bread that as he is about to tell the disciples is his own body. Jesus *is* the Bread of Life and he gives *himself* to the crowd—and of course not just to them a long time ago but to *us* each week as well. He is the host of this meal where what he offers is himself—his life that we might live.

Then there is this "*lad*." Matthew, Mark and Luke tell us nothing about a boy with five barley loaves and some dried fish. John may be remembering the story from II Kings about Elisha and the man who came from Baal-shalishah with twenty loaves of barley bread. There, Elisha tells the man to give it the crowd to eat, but the man objects: "how can I set this before a hundred men?" Elisha

insists that it will be enough and in fact that it will be more than enough, that there will be leftovers. (See II Kings 4:42-44)

In both that Old Testament narrative and in John's inclusion of this boy with the loaves and fish to offer, the point is pretty straightforward. When we offer what we have, God fills in the gaps. Many of us feel like what we have to offer isn't enough. We may worry about our ability to parent, or to be a good friend, or to get good grades in school, or to play a musical instrument. We are sometimes almost embarrassed that we seem to have so little to offer. What this? It's nothing, really...

I think this vignette remembered by John about this boy is akin to Jesus' reminder not to let our light be hidden under a bushel basket, but to let it shine. When we take the risk of sharing what we do have (rather than insisting it is nothing, not nearly enough) then God blesses the gift and stretches it in ways that go far beyond what we can imagine. An act of kindness to a stranger, an ice-cream for a sad Little Leaguer, a casserole dropped off at a friend's house whose husband of forty-seven years finally lost his battle to cancer—these are little things. And we are tempted to say, "what are they in the midst of the enormity of pain and hurt in the world?" And the answer is, "just offer it and let God bless it." You may just be surprised by how far it does in fact go. It's a reminder that what we are called to is ministry—doing "mini" things—little things—that have the potential, with God's help, to bring about maximal effects.

All four gospel writers tell this miracle story with Eucharistic overtones. The bread being shared in the field is connected to the bread that is offered each week at the Lord's Table. But John pushes this even further than the synoptic gospels. First of all, he emphasizes up front that it's Passover. But he also speaks of how the "fragments are gathered up" after everyone eats their fill. In one of the earliest Eucharistic prayers of the Church—even before the gospels became written documents—the community gathered and prayed this prayer in the *Didache*:

*As this fragmented bread was scattered upon the mountains, but has been gathered up to become one; so let the Church be gathered up to become your kingdom.*

As Episcopalians we go back not only to the Scriptures but to those early formative experiences of what Orthodox Christians like to call, "the undivided Church." Before there were Greek Orthodox and Roman Catholic and Dutch Reformed and Anglican Christians, there were just Christians who gathered together to remember Jesus. They gathered and remembered how he fed the five thousand that day, and how on the night before he died he took the Passover bread and blessed it, and broke it, and gave it to them. Over the course of this next month I invite you to enter more deeply into the mystery of the sixth chapter of John's Gospel. As we do that we'll be singing Eucharistic hymns that also help to shape what we believe.

But our *belief* is not merely an intellectual discussion. I invite you in the weeks ahead to "taste and see" that the Lord is good. Come with joy to meet your Lord, forgiven, loved, and free. Come to eat this bread and drink this cup and as you do so, ask God to open your eyes to see, and your heart to love, and your hands to serve. From that place we can reflect theologically—not as an intellectual exercise but based on that first-hand experience of God's presence in our midst, in and through the bread that we share. Look around you: as the wheat was once scattered in many different places, here it is gathered into one loaf, and in the same way, we, who are many, are also one, for we all partake of the one loaf.