

*I love John's Gospel.* When I was in seminary, my favorite gospel was Mark's, who portrays Jesus as a kind of "rebel with a cause." Over the years, as a pastor, I've developed a deep affection for Luke's Gospel: I love Luke for his profound witness to the compassion and mercy of God and for being the only one of the four gospel writers to include parables like the story of the Prodigal Son and the Good Samaritan. Matthew's alright too, although it's never been a favorite of mine; it's Matthew that was the primary source for *Godspell* and it is he who gives us the Sermon on the Mount, which includes the beatitudes.

But in recent years, perhaps in part because of my affiliation with the Fellowship of St. John the Evangelist in Cambridge, I've been drawn more deeply into the mysticism of the fourth gospel. John's profound awareness of the meaning of the Incarnation gets to the heart of what I find most compelling about the gospel at this stage in my journey. I love the prologue, which in a nutshell encapsulates who Jesus is. I love the wedding feast at Cana in Galilee where water is turned not just into wine, but the *best* wine. I love all of those "I AM" sayings of Jesus—including the one in the sixth chapter which we have been exploring these past few weeks: I am the bread of life.

The obstacle I had to overcome, however, in order to more fully appreciate the Gospel of John was to figure out how to deal with John's annoying habit of using this phrase, "the Jews." He talks about "the Jews" a lot and it sounds as if he is constantly blaming them and even scapegoating them for not recognizing Jesus for who he is, and every time I hear that phrase "the Jews" I feel like nails are scraping on a chalkboard and want to yell, "time out!"

Remember that Jesus and his disciples are also Jews. That is what we are prone to forget across the centuries. Jesus is called "the King of the Jews," after all; not "King of the Christians!" So "the Jews" that John is speaking about are clearly not *all* Jews. In fact, the phrase that is used again and again in John's Gospel could more accurately be translated as "the Judaeans." This is not political correctness on my part, but historical accuracy about John's context.

As in the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), Jesus' conflict is with the *temple authorities in Jerusalem*; with the *religious leaders*, not with all Jews. In the synoptic gospels those leaders are usually identified as "the scribes and the Pharisees." So I've heard some modern translators suggest that wherever it says "the Jews" we should read, "the clergy." But that isn't exactly right, either, since the Pharisees were a lay movement. Maybe you could say, "the clergy and vestry..." This is not intended to criticize clergy (or anyone willing to serve on vestry) and it has its limitations. But *all* translations are limited and the point I am trying to make is that when we say "the Jews" we tend not to see our own complicity. If we were to say something like the "clergy and vestry" then it hits a little closer to home, and that is the point I am trying to make; as I said, not as a point of political correctness but as an important *theological* point.

In Jesus' day (as in our own day) those in positions of authority—those who are responsible for *managing* change—are not always eager to see radical transformation. Keep in mind that there were scribes and Pharisees who did get what Jesus was up to. But their role in keeping the status quo kept many of them, and maybe even most of them, from stepping in faith toward the good news Jesus came to proclaim. Instead they resisted; they pushed back. People who try to make

change will always be met by some resistance because there are always those who have a vested interest in the status quo.

Moreover, John's Gospel is written at a time when the early Christian Church has been "kicked out" of the synagogue. Think of the conflicts in our own Anglican Communion over the past decade or so, and particularly around property fights. Imagine a conflicted congregation where one side "wins" the building and the others are kicked out. It doesn't really matter which side you are on, by the way, or with whom you identify. Just imagine how it feels when the place you called home your whole life is no longer is your spiritual home. You just might have some lingering hostility at those who are claiming to be the "true" Church.

Something like that happened within first-century Judaism as well. Those first followers of Jesus were Jews and the fight was around what it meant to be both faithful to the past and open to the new thing God was doing; the work of Jesus began as a movement *within* Judaism and only later did a Gentile Church separate from Judaism begin to emerge. So increasingly the followers of Jesus found themselves at odds with the Jewish religious establishment.

Now in one sense this is a rather long digression in our "Bread of Life" summer series on the sixth chapter of John. But it's an important digression, I think and spending five weeks on one chapter of a gospel allows us time for such digressions. In fact a part of me wishes I could make this point every time we read from John's Gospel, especially in Holy Week where we hear that phrase, "the Jews," over and over again. No one should ever leave here thinking that the "good news" we are here to proclaim promotes Christian anti-Semitism and to do that is, I think, a gross misreading of what John is really getting at. So: "the Jews" is not a term not meant to describe all Jewish persons in all times and in all places but a way to label the conflict that is unfolding between those Jews (and later Gentiles) who see Jesus as the fulfillment of Judaism and those Jewish leaders who see Jesus a threat.

So now back to our previously scheduled program! We can now continue where we left off last week: *Jesus is the bread of life, the one who satisfies our hunger for God and quenches our thirst for life.*

Last weekend I spoke about a spiritual memoir by Margaret Bullitt-Jonas, a priest in our diocese. The book is called *Holy Hunger: A Woman's Journey from Food Addiction to Spiritual Fulfillment*. It is uniquely her story. And yet, as sometimes happens when people get to the depth of their life stories, it resonates not just with women but men, not just with those who may struggle with eating disorders but with anyone who is on the journey away from unhealthy behaviors and addictions and toward spiritual fulfillment.

St. Augustine said that we are created with a God-sized hole inside of us. It is simply how we are made as creatures of a God who has created us, male and female, in God's own image. We are made to hunger for God.

But along the way we make the mistake of trying to satisfy that hunger with all kinds of things that are less than God: food or money or success or alcohol or sex or golf or the praise of others or even another person. Even love of family, in the ethics of Jesus, is not meant to come before

God. It isn't that any of these things—food or money or success or family—are bad in and of themselves. In fact that is precisely the problem we face: they are good things, very good things that have a rightful place in our lives. But the problem is that we are prone to make these penultimate things ultimate; we are prone toward making them into gods. And as long as we try to fill that God-hunger within us with such lesser things, we will be disappointed at best and at worst find ourselves trapped in a cycle of addiction.

*Only God can satisfy our hungry hearts.* I don't mean the Santa Claus god who is making his list and checking it twice, or the god who is a cheerleader for American international interests, or the varied and sundry false gods who are sometimes proclaimed, even from Christian pulpits, as totems whose sole concern is to satiate our ego needs. These false images of God are like junk food for our souls and they will not satisfy our hungry hearts. (And everybody's got a hungry heart, to quote that great American theologian, Bruce Springsteen!)

In the sixth chapter of John's Gospel, Jesus is talking about weighty matters. He is reminding his listeners about "I AM" at the burning bush, the holy One whom Isaiah encounters in the holy of holies, the true and living God who is beyond god. It is that God whom Jesus reveals in his living and in his dying and in his being raised again on the third day. Ignatius of Antioch said the Eucharist is the power of resurrection, "the leaven of immortality." To eat the bread that Jesus gives us—nothing less than his very flesh—is to participate in the Easter life that makes us truly alive and whole.

But when we find that our hunger really is satisfied, we are changed. We Episcopalians sometimes squirm a bit when we hear about change. Sometimes we speak of *transformation* as if we can use a big theological word and spiritualize it but as any kid with a transformer can tell you the whole point of transformation is change. The whole point is that we are called to become a new creation.

I don't know of too many people who sign on for that initially. It's part of the journey. Our parents bring us to the church, perhaps, maybe as much out of family tradition as a deep commitment to Christ. (You know, great-grandma wore that white baptismal gown that is now a bit yellowed with age and will soon be too small for Johnny to fit into). Or maybe we come to enroll our kids in church school or because we are facing a rough patch in our marriage. But when we are still—maybe standing at the gravesite of someone we loved very much or maybe walking along the beach on a beautiful August day, we sometimes become aware of something much deeper—that yearning, that hunger for God, that God-sized hole within each of us that is simply part of the human condition.

You and I are invited in those moments to "taste and see" that the Lord is good. To let God be God until we find ourselves becoming what we have eaten: bread for a hungry world and an Easter people who find new life in and through Christ. We gather at the Eucharistic feast to share his body and blood and to behold that he is bread of heaven—living bread that fills that God-sized hole in each of us—living bread that satisfies the hungry heart.