



A Different Kind of Full

John 6:35, 41-51

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We've jumped right into the middle of John chapter 6 to find this Sunday's "I am" statement, so I'll just quickly catch you up on the story so far. Jesus is currently being chased back and forth across a lake by a giant, hungry crowd. It sounds like a scene from a Peter Sellers' film, or maybe a Monty Python sketch.

But it is, in essence, what's been happening for the last couple of days for Jesus; the crowd has him in their sights, and they aren't letting him get away, by boat, on foot or by any other means. The reason there's such a big crowd in the area is because it's only a week or so from Passover, one of the biggest religious festivals in the Jewish calendar. Passover is an observation and celebration of how God acted to free the Jewish people from their captivity in Egypt, led by Moses and happening a few generations after the story of Joseph and his brothers and Pharaoh that we read today in the children's time.

In fairness to the crowd, Jesus has been doing some pretty amazing things. The event that really kicked off their pursuit was a healing that Jesus had performed at the Sheep Gate in Jerusalem a few days ago of a man who had suffered a debilitating illness for decades, the famous "stand up, take your mat and walk" moment. And then, just the day before, Jesus fed the giant 5000+ crowd with only five loaves and two fish - every belly full, and twelve baskets of leftovers. When the crowd got aggressive in their pursuit of him, Jesus fled up a mountain and the disciples took off in a boat across the lake. During the night, Jesus walked on the water to get to them, and they safely came ashore on the other side of Lake Galilee.

But the giant, hungry crowd is resourceful; not finding Jesus where they'd left him, they, too, commandeered a fleet of boats and went across the lake after him. And when they find Jesus, they ask him, when did you come here?

We can read between the lines a little and hear another question: how did you get past us?

Jesus skips the niceties when he answers them, bypassing how he escaped and speaking straight to their motivation in chasing after him: “Very truly I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of loaves.”

So this is not a crowd-sized spiritual awakening; they were intent on finding Jesus because he’d provided a very filling dinner free of charge the day before, and they were looking for seconds. They weren’t interested in learning more about the incredible things Jesus did, in understanding the signs of his power, identity and purpose expressed by healing the disabled man, multiplying a single lunch into an abundant picnic feast, walking on the water. Their bellies were filled the day before; but their hearts were, and are, empty of wonder.

The crowd’s short-sighted effort to find Jesus is from the wrong motivation, and Jesus calls them on it. But it’s understandable, I’d say; when you’ve been given a good meal, don’t you hope for a return invitation? And yet, this is our typical approach to our relationship with God.

We seek him through our quick prayers for whatever it is we are in need of: instant clarity on a decision we need to make, a resource we lack, a struggle we need rescuing from; we want the quick fix of a full belly, right now, and we know God provides. And that’s fine, as far as it goes. But what happens when God doesn’t dish up what we ask him for?

I think it depends, really; if the relationship between us and God is sturdy and deeply wanted on both sides - and God always wants us - then I expect that not getting the quick fix won’t turn us away. But if our yearning for God isn’t there, if our relationship with God is solely about getting the quick fix on demand, our disappointment, our anger, our disgust with God for not stepping up when we told him what we needed him to do...we might well move on to the next thing that promises to fill our bellies, to meet that need, to give us that clarity, that rescue, we seek. Meeting the needs for life can be all-consuming to our attention, so we demand the full belly; but we keep missing what Jesus is offering in abundance: a heart full of wonder, a much fuller “feast,” a different kind of full.

Moses and manna in the desert and ancestors come up several times during this “I am the bread of life” discussion. I expect it was fresh in everyone’s minds, since it’s very much a part of the Passover and exodus from Egypt stories. After they had successfully fled from Egypt and escaped the Egyptian army, God’s people wandered lost in the desert for many, many years. Food was scarce, and the people complained that they had been led from captivity only to starve.

So God caused manna, bread from heaven, to cover the ground like dew in the morning. More than enough fell, and the people could gather it and eat their fill. A gift: necessary, practical, and abundant. An interesting thing happened, too: whether someone gathered a lot or a little, each person had exactly enough. The only condition to this gift was not to save any overnight for the next day; it would spoil and not be edible by morning. But God promised to provide manna for them, every day, until their environment could support their needs again.

So what do the people do?

They store some of the manna, the bread of heaven, overnight. By morning, it is maggoty and rotting and stinking.

The only string attached to that bread was trusting what God promised: there would be more tomorrow. Bellies would always be full enough. What a wonder indeed.

Jesus is far more than a new Moses and the bread he’s talking about is different, and more, than manna from heaven. When Jesus tells the people, “I am the bread of life,” he is saying that he’s the gift of life, coming from heaven, sent by God to the world. Jesus passionately tells the giant, hungry crowd that if they come looking for him to feed them spiritually - and not just their stomachs - they will never know what it’s like to be spiritually hungry or thirsty, to be spiritually in need. In and through Christ, we receive the abundance of God, and as full as Jesus made their bellies the day before, so the Spirit can - and will - fill their hearts with life, with wonder that will never cease.

So what do the people do?

They begin to complain: “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’?” How can you be from heaven, Jesus? We know who you are already. Suspicion, dismissal, distrust, even anger, from the crowd. So frustrated and put off by what Jesus has said, only a few verses beyond what we read today, many of Jesus’ hitherto faithful followers turn back and no longer want to be taught - fed - by him.

Very like the people of God trying to store manna overnight, only to find it rotting in the morning, the struggle to accept, to trust, when it comes to believing that God will keep his promises today and tomorrow hasn’t gone away. From the desert, as God’s people journeyed between slavery and freedom, to around and around the lake that day with the giant hungry crowd. The only string attached to the full belly was trusting that God would do it again tomorrow, and eventually supply better bread for a different kind of hunger.

Sometimes, we approach our relationship with God looking for the catch, the small print of what we’ve signed up for, when we’re looking for a full belly. When we don’t know God’s abundance, we can get caught in the same thinking, shaped by distrust and suspicion...and perhaps a broken, worn-down heart, too. The huge and hungry crowd wanted to know what they had to do to get this bread of life Jesus was talking about because bread that’s better than manna, better than regular baked bread, that doesn’t spoil or run out or leave you empty - that’s some pretty good bread.

Do not work for food that spoils, said Jesus, but for food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. They reply, what must we do to do the works God requires? How do we get this bread?

Jesus tells them that the work is already done for them by the Son of Man, by God in Christ.

Understandably, people with full bellies but hearts empty of wonder tend to think a bit literally, so Jesus might’ve already lost some of them when it became clear that lunch was not forthcoming. But now perhaps, Jesus has them wondering a little: how can their work be done by God on their behalf? There must be some transaction to be made here, and they don’t want to be in someone’s debt or not have some kind of control or say in all of this.

No matter the reason, we humans always seem to find it difficult to fathom that, when it comes to God, it's all the work of God. Anything we do is not the work itself; it's a response to God at work in us.

There is a difference between being hungry and hungering, between thirsting and being thirsty. When we are hungry and thirsty, we lack, we are in need of something to eat or drink. These are the conditions Jesus promises we will never ever experience in our hearts and minds and souls if we feed on him spiritually. But when we hunger and thirst, we are craving more of something. We aren't meant to think of Jesus' promise as a commitment to our "being satisfied," but of our yearning, our craving for him, being supplied. In a spiritual sense, if we know and trust Christ as the source of all good things, we will want more of him and his will in our lives, of Christ ruling in our hearts and the Spirit's presence filling us.

The Old Testament prophets speak of hungering and thirsting after God's righteousness, the Song of Solomon speaks in an allegorical, poetic way of yearning for the presence and enjoyment of God, and imagery of continuing to hunger, thirst and press on towards God has long been part of the Christian tradition.

In his *Life of Moses*, early Christian thinker Gregory of Nyssa describes it this way: "This truly is the vision of God: never to be satisfied in the desire to see him. But one must always, by looking at what he can see, rekindle his desire to see more."

It is impossible for us to have had so much Jesus as our spiritual breakfast as to tire when he is also our lunch, dinner, and dessert. Better than a full belly, our hearts are full of wonder and holy desire, hungering and thirsting for God, for relationship with him; able to expand and become a vessel of God's nourishment and blessing for others.

We are spending the season of Lent this year in the Gospel of John, a beautiful, poetic and carefully-crafted opening up of Jesus' identity, like the unfurling of a flower. It may also be a very familiar book to you, because of the wonderful images and narratives contained within.

And yet it is of such depth and richness that we can revisit it again and again over our lifetimes and continue to discover new meaning. A more contemporary theologian described it this way: “As soon as you open John’s gospel, you are aware that you are breathing a different air from that which you encountered in Matthew, Mark and Luke. It has often been described as a magic pool in which an elephant may swim and an infant may paddle. My sense of it is that it is a journey into the mystery of who Jesus is, inviting us ever deeper as the story unfolds.”

Nearly every culture that exists or has existed has some idea of the divine, and an understanding of how earthly life and divine life interact, or connect with one another. In many examples, it is humanity that must do some great work or climb up to meet their gods, under their own power and capability.

But not Christians; not us.

There’s a repeated motif throughout Scripture, from Genesis to Revelation, that appears in slightly different guises: places or moments where heaven and earth overlap, and become, however briefly, one. The Garden of God’s good creation is the first; mountain-tops and unique places, like Moses on Mount Sinai or Jacob and his ladder of angels, fill our Old Testament with extraordinary stories. Later, the holy tents and temples of Israel and Jerusalem are the places where God is present with his people, and his people are present with God. And Jesus, both fully divine and fully human, is another place where the things of heaven and the things of earth are one. The final image, of course, is the new heaven and new earth in Revelation, at the end of the Bible and time as we know it, the holy city where humanity and God dwell with one another in perfect peace and delight, forever.

Jesus’ “I am” statements help us see the borders between heaven and earth and explore that connection, the deeper sense of that relationship with God, blurring the line that divides heavenly and earthly life. We’ll continue to explore all the ways that Jesus brings heaven and earth together through his “I am” statements.

But for today, 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.” We might add now, though, that we will still hunger and thirst, yearning for more of him.

Jesus filled bellies to teach how full a heart could be when fed by the living bread of heaven, even while here on earth. Jesus continues to come, as the bread of life, inserting more and more of heaven into earth, into our hearts and lives, as we prepare for the new, resurrection life that is coming. Thanks be to God. Amen.