



ROSE  
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CHURCH

John 6:53-71  
So That You May Believe: John  
“The Bread of Life – Part 2”

Rev. Brian North  
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So often in life, we want things easy – we want shortcuts in life. **And when things get difficult, or when they aren’t going as we thought they would, sometimes we jump ship.** It happens in some marriages, though usually there’s an honest effort at maintaining the relationship before a separation or divorce; it happens in churches, where people just up and leave to another church down the street without making an honest effort to work things out with whoever it is that stepped on their toes; it happens in places of work, it happens with students...it happens with fans of sports teams. In fact, in the sports world, we have a term for fans who only voice their support for a team when things are going well. We call them, “fair-weather fans” or “bandwagon fans. They want things easy, they want victory all the time...and when that doesn’t happen, they walk away. We may find out this fall who the fair-weather/bandwagon fans of the Seahawks are as they play for the first time in 10 years without Russell Wilson. Of course, the Mariners would love to have some fair-weather fans, but they’re not making that easy this year, as has been the case for the last 20 years. ☺ They’re down to just the hard-core fans by now.

And in today’s passage, we see some people who were disciples of Jesus leave him after he gives a so-called “hard teaching.” So, we are in John 6:53-71 this morning, continuing our series in John’s gospel. And today we get the conclusion of the conversation Jesus has with these people – many, if not most, of whom witnessed him feed a crowd of thousands with a little boy’s lunch. And in this conversation, which we started last week, Jesus has said – twice – that he is “the bread of life” and continued this metaphor to speak of spiritual nourishment. Just as bread is basic to their meals in their culture, he is a basic, foundational piece to life, including our walk with God. So, he continues that theme in today’s passage. So, let’s dive in to **John 6:53-71**.

Now, I mentioned this last week, but just to remind you, when John tells us that some of his disciples left, these were not part of the 12 Disciples. We oftentimes call those 12 “The Disciples” but there were many others who were disciples at some level, outside of the 12. In order to fully understand

why they left, and why they thought this was a hard teaching, we need to put things in context.

Earlier in this chapter, we see a crowd of people asking Jesus some questions, as they try to figure out who Jesus is and what he's all about. For instance, we read in verses 30 and 31: **So, they asked him, "What sign then will you give that we may see it and believe you? What will you do? Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written: 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat' (John 6:30-31)."** And as we noted last week, they ask this question after Jesus had given them a sign just the day before, by feeding them with the boy's lunch. Yet, it's not enough. They want something more, or different.

And in his response to them, Jesus sticks with the manna and bread theme which they brought up. And the statement that starts to get everyone mumbling and grumbling is when he says in verse 35, **"I am the bread of life" – Jesus (John 6:35)**. So, just as God the Father sent manna from heaven to nourish their ancestors: now God has sent his Son from heaven as nourishment of a different kind – spiritual nourishment. And Jesus clearly says in verse 29 as well as in verses 35, 40, 47, that "believing" in him is the key. We looked at last week, that believing in him is the way to receive this bread from heaven. It's the key that unlocks the metaphor.

Jesus says in verse 51 that this bread is his flesh, and whoever eats of it will live forever. But that gets the crowd in a tizzy, and in verse 52 they start to argue among themselves over the question, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" which you can't really blame them in some ways. It seems odd. And then Jesus says to them in what we read this morning something that makes it even more controversial. He throws gasoline on the fire when: **Jesus says that not only does eating his flesh lead to spiritual nourishment, but so does drinking his blood (John 6:53)**. Without that, he says, "you have no life in you." So now he's doubling down on the metaphor, and at least some of them start to lose their marbles over this. The metaphor is beyond their ability to grasp. And it goes against all Jewish thinking because when they ate meat, the blood was always drained out. They did this because blood was considered the source of life – obviously, it's needed in order to live – and

because blood was considered sacred, which is why an animal sacrifice was used in the most sacred part of worship.

So, for Jesus to say they must “eat his flesh and drink his blood” because he is the true bread of life that has come down from heaven...and that doing so leads to true life...well, that’s just completely outside their boxes of thinking. And it does sound a little strange, especially if you’re hearing this and you think Jesus is speaking literally, as if he’s advocating for cannibalism. If you’ve never set foot in a church before or know nothing about Jesus, please don’t judge Jesus on this statement without the full context. Hang in there for a few more minutes, because there’s no cannibalism in Christianity.

As I said last week and have already said this morning as well: Jesus is using this as a metaphor, with a couple points being made. I’ll start with one that we did not touch on last week, because it becomes more obvious in today’s reading and that is: **Jesus is foreshadowing the Last Supper and what we celebrate in Communion.** This simple meal of bread and wine, or grape juice, is something that probably most of us are familiar with – we do it on the first Sunday of each month here, which is common in a lot of churches though some do it every week, and others do it quarterly.

For them, the Passover meal was an annual celebration when they remembered the freedom that God gave their ancestors as He led them out of Egypt and out of slavery. The high point of the Passover celebration was the Passover meal which consisted of several elements, and unleavened bread and wine were two significant parts of it. And so, when Jesus celebrates the Passover for the last time in his life, he does it with his Disciples. He takes the bread of the meal, breaks it, gives it to his disciples and tells them that this bread is his body, broken for them. Then he takes the cup of wine and says that it is his blood poured out for them, and the sign of the new covenant God makes with them. Jesus doesn’t change the meaning and symbolism of the elements, but he radically transforms them nonetheless with his claim that they are his body broken and his blood poured out, clearly pointing to his death on the cross.

**What actually happens in Communion, given Jesus' statements about the elements?** Catholic Christian theology says the bread and wine literally become Jesus' body in a physical sense. Lutherans and some other protestant Christians believe Jesus' body is there *with* the bread and wine, but the two elements aren't actually changed. Other protestant Christians – including Presbyterians like us, and many others, say “Jesus is physically at the right hand of God the Father, so how can Jesus be there and here in a physical way? It must be a spiritual presence.” So, we believe Christ is present in the elements spiritually. I realize that whole Christian movements and denominations have divided over the theology of the Lord's Supper and discussing theological differences can be really engaging and interesting. But in the end, we have to leave it in the hands of God. What we believe about the bread and the wine and Jesus' presence in them has no impact on how Jesus is *actually* present in Communion. This is true about any other aspect of our theology as well. Our beliefs do not control God. At the Last Supper, Jesus tells his disciples to “do this in remembrance of me.” So, we partake of communion knowing that in some way, God is present in that sacrament, and it strengthens our faith every time we take communion, remembering that Jesus is the bread of life, whose body was broken and blood poured out on the cross...and whoever believes in him receives eternal life.

So, his teaching here, in today's passage is foreshadowing his Last Supper. And some 2,000 years later after his last Passover meal and his death on the cross, we still eat the bread and drink the wine or juice as the symbols of Jesus' once for all sacrificial death on the cross.

The second meaning that Jesus is trying to convey in today's passage is what we touched on last week as well, so I'll keep this brief. But it is this: **Jesus is the bread from heaven and He is more than enough to fill us up and satisfy us now and for eternity.** We don't need to look for fulfillment in other places. In fact, spiritual fulfillment is the deepest kind of fulfillment there is, and we often try to fill it with all kinds of things that are really quite shallow: Money, our stuff, accomplishments, relationships, prestige, power, pride, and more. Many of these things are fine, in and of themselves – such as relationships and accomplishments. The problem is we make too much of them, and ultimately, they lead us to make too much of ourselves. That's

what pride is. Pride is making too much of ourselves; it's making an idol of ourselves. That's why humility and service of others, and loving our neighbors as ourselves and these kinds of themes are so consistent throughout Scripture – with the ultimate antidote to pride and idolatry being to keep God first. There is only one God on the throne, and we would do well not to put ourselves, or anything else, in his place. When we forget that, it leads to all kinds of stuff that's bad for us and goes against God's will.

So, **Jesus is saying here that he's more than enough.** He satisfies. He's the bread of life, and when we eat and drink deeply from him and what he offers, the other needs and desires we have in life pale in comparison, and he satisfies us completely. He is all that we need, ultimately, here and now, and for eternity.

So that's what he's saying to these disciples. But to them it was a hard teaching, too difficult to live out, as they took it too literally. They didn't want to take the time to understand him, and instead rush to a quick judgment...and so a number of them jump ship...they walk away. Jesus even turns to the 12, and he says, "Are you leaving as well?" And Peter, who frequently speaks on behalf of the 12, for better and for worse depending on the situation and what comes out of his mouth...he says in verse 68, "**Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God**" (John 6:12). Notice this word, "believe." Remember what we said last week, and recapped earlier this morning: What does Jesus say is the key to understanding the metaphor of Jesus as the bread of life? "Believing" him. Here we see that Peter gets it. The 12 disciples got it. Peter says they "believe and know that Jesus is the Holy One of God." So, what does this mean for us today? Let me briefly draw a couple points of application.

**First of all, we should celebrate Communion.** That becomes even more apparent later on when Jesus actually celebrates the Passover meal for the last time, and takes the bread and the cup of wine and quite stunningly announces that those elements don't just celebrate freedom from slavery that God granted their ancestors 1,500 years earlier or so, but that the elements

point to himself, who grants us *eternal* freedom from the sin that binds us, when we believe in Him. Jesus is clearly alluding to that in today's passage.

Secondly, when Jesus, or the Bible more broadly, gives us what we think is a "hard teaching," frequently it's not so much the actual teaching that's hard, but that our hearts are hard. John Calvin writes in his commentary on this passage, "**The hardness was in their hearts, not in the saying...they complain that His saying is hard, which really ought to have softened them**" (John Calvin).<sup>1</sup> When Jesus says stuff that makes us say, "Wow...that's a really hard teaching...I don't like that...could it actually mean something different that's easier and more palatable?"...it's not usually that it's difficult to grasp intellectually. And it's not usually even the case that what he teaches and calls us to do is difficult in a technical sense – like building a house or computer programming or whatever. Those things require technical knowledge that make them hard to do if you don't have that knowledge. With Jesus, that is rarely, if ever, the case.

**Usually, what's hard about the teaching is our hearts and our attitudes toward Jesus and what he says, because we simply don't want to let his teaching be our rule for living.** For example, we don't want to love our neighbor as ourselves. We don't even want to get to know them – they're too different than us, perhaps. We had neighbors once here in Kirkland who liked to sit out on their back patio and smoke marijuana. We'd be out in our back yard with our kids, perhaps with friends over for a meal...and our neighbors would come out to their back yard and the smell of marijuana would inevitably waft our way. We had our differences. But we did get to know them and understand more about them. But sometimes that's hard and we don't really want to.

Or we simply don't think about getting to know them...it's not on our radar screen because our we aren't thinking about life through the lens of our faith. Or we're just lazy. The theologian Karl Barth said, in a nutshell (because nothing he said was short...he was quite verbose, so I'll just summarize), that "slothfulness" (or "laziness") is the sin we struggle with the most. Getting to know the people around us, making room for them, and seeking ways we can

befriend them and extend care to them is not really that difficult...we just find it easier *not* to get to know someone new; it's easier to do nothing.

But just as a farmer needs a plow to till and soften the ground, sometimes Jesus has to be pretty pointed with us, too. And so, his word can be a little pointed, a little sharp, to soften us and spur us on. Elsewhere in Scripture it says that God's word is like a double-edged sword. It cuts to the heart of the matter. But the fact is, we need that. So, recognizing that it really *is* our hard hearts, and not Jesus' teaching, that keep us from following him and living out his teachings and the rest of the teachings of Scripture, is a huge step to allowing Him to soften our hearts. It changes our whole approach to what Jesus says, from "I don't like what you say, Jesus, so I'm going to make your teaching bend to my will and my desires" ...Acknowledging that it is our hearts that are hard changes us from that mentality to **"What you say may be difficult for me to hear, but I believe you have my best interests in mind, and I trust you, so I'll bend my desires to your will."** When we encounter a hard teaching in scripture, this is the posture to have.

There are some things that Scripture says that we think are too hard a pill to swallow. We might be tempted to abandon ship – either in regards to Jesus completely, or in regards to some facet of what Scripture teaches. But maybe what's hard is inside us, right here (our heart). So, where is your heart hard to Jesus? Pray that he would soften you...that the Holy Spirit would open you up to what He's saying. And then let's go where he leads us, no matter how difficult we may perceive it to be, knowing that Jesus will keep us nourished for the journey. Because: Jesus is the Bread of Life. He's a basic, foundational ingredient to living rightly in this world, and in the next. Let's pray...Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> John Calvin, *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries; John 1-10*, Eerdmans Publishing, 1995, p. 173.