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John 6:22-34

Eighteenth Message

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DEEP HUNGER, REAL FOOD

In his book *A Glimpse of Jesus*, Brennan Manning asks the question,

Who is the Jesus of your journey?... In 451 C.E., the Council of Chalcedon answered that Jesus is the incarnation of the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity. Contemporary theologians offer varied alternatives: Jesus is the man for others, the ethical liberator, the personal Savior, the human face of God. Artists and poets speak of Jesus the clown, the mythological man, and the superstar... The gospel of John is concerned with only one thing—the person of Jesus. Do we know him? Everything else fades into twilight and darkness; it becomes irrelevant and is shunted aside.¹

John, the gospel storyteller, wants to break through our preconceived notions, our inherited prejudices, our hard, religious exteriors, our crusty flesh, our self-pity and self-hatred and our carefully-placed excuses to bring us face to face with the only one who can transform our lives and set us free. Religion doesn't do this. Being a good Christian doesn't do this. Knowing how to act and what to say doesn't do this. If we really want Jesus we have to let go of everything we are trying to hold onto to take hold of the only thing that truly matters. But it will be worth it. As an old Franciscan told Manning when he joined the order, "Once you come to know the love of Jesus Christ, nothing else in the world will seem beautiful or desirable."²

We resume our studies in chapter 6 of the gospel of John. It is Passover, and Jesus has fed the multitude and crossed the sea by walking on water. This is the end of Jesus' public Galilean ministry recorded in the Fourth Gospel. Chapters 5-10 of John form a unit that centers on four Jewish feasts or holy days: Sabbath (5:9; 9:14), Passover (6:4), Tabernacles (7:2), and Dedication (10:22). John redefines and rewrites Jewish history in the person of Jesus. Gentiles find John's words filled with depth and significance. The Jewish reader, however, will find his world turned upside down.

In Jesus' feeding of the multitude and crossing the sea, John is saying more than the fact that Jesus is the Lord over creation. Jesus is redefining the exodus event and the Passover, when Moses led the people of God out of bondage from Egypt, took them safely through the water, and fed them with manna from heaven in the wilderness. In John 6, the most important event in Jewish history is being repeated and eclipsed.

The miracles of the feeding of the multitude and the crossing of the sea are followed by the lengthy "bread of life" discourse,

which is followed in turn by the response of his disciples. It's not easy to divide this text into sections, and yet it has a clear progression, which is united around the recurring refrain, "I will raise Him up on the last day" (vv. 39, 40, 44, 54).

The next day the crowd that stood on the other side of the sea saw that there was no other small boat there, except one, and that Jesus had not entered with His disciples into the boat, but that His disciples had gone away alone. There came other small boats from Tiberias near to the place where they ate the bread after the Lord had given thanks. So when the crowd saw that Jesus was not there, nor His disciples, they themselves got into the small boats, and came to Capernaum seeking Jesus. When they found Him on the other side of the sea, they said to Him, "Rabbi, when did You get here?"

Jesus answered them and said, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you seek Me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate of the loaves and were filled." (John 6:22-26 NASB)

Think about this scene for a moment. A multitude (five thousand of whom were men) gathered around Jesus, and he fed them all, as much as they wanted, from the meager resources of five loaves and two fishes. Imagine what was going on in people's minds. Picture the excitement and the frenzy that greeted this miraculous feeding.

Upon awakening the next day, the crowd was still buzzing about what had happened. Everyone was looking for Jesus. There had been only one boat and it had left without Jesus, with the disciples aboard. The crowd boarded a number of small boats which had come over from Tiberias, perhaps blown in by the storm, and sailed to Capernaum, seeking Jesus. They found him at the synagogue in his home town (verse 59). Addressing him as rabbi, they ask, "When did you get here?" This was not quite in line with their desire to make him king, expressed the day before.

As he has done in the past, Jesus refuses to answer their question or be trapped by their agenda. Rather, he unmask their motivation for seeking him, saying, "Truly, truly, I say to you..." They were seeking him for the wrong reasons. We have already encountered this theme in John. Previously, the crowd enjoyed the signs which Jesus did, but they did not see the deeper significance to which the signs pointed. However, in this case, Jesus charges that the crowd pursued him, not because they saw signs, but for baser motives: they were

filled with bread and they wanted more. To them, Jesus was the wonder bread boy!

The same question confronts us. Why are we seeking Jesus? This is the same question that Jesus asked two potential disciples in chapter 1, when he “turned and saw them following, and said to them, ‘What do you seek?’” (1:38). Why do we come to Jesus? What are we looking for? Why did you come to church this morning? If you could ask Jesus to do something for you right now, what would that be?

At the beginning of my own journey with Jesus I just wanted him to fix my life and solve my problems. At times now I seek him for very selfish reasons, wanting him to do something to make my life better. People seek Jesus for the wrong reasons. This is a good question to ask people, whether they are Christians or not. What are you after from God? What do you want from Jesus? The signs of Jesus point toward a deeper relationship with God. Is that what we truly want?

Jesus continues:

“Do not work for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you, for on Him the Father, God, has set His seal.” Therefore they said to Him, “What shall we do, so that we may work the works of God?” Jesus answered and said to them, “This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent.” (6:27-29)

Many of you know what is coming. Jesus will go on to say, “I am the bread of life.” But that is not where he begins. We need to hold off and examine these verses fully.

First, notice how carefully Jesus identifies himself. He uses the Daniel 7 term, “Son of Man,” as he does so often in John, hinting at his coming suffering and vindication. Some Jews understood this to be a Messianic term. Jesus is also the one on whom the Father has set his “seal.” In those days, a seal was a mark made of wax, placed on a letter to indicate authenticity and ownership. Jesus is certified as God’s agent, perhaps a reference to his baptism. Later, Paul will say that believers are sealed by the Holy Spirit. Jesus also refers to himself as the one whom the Father has sent, words frequently used in John.

Jesus begins his dialogue by contrasting earthly food that perishes and the food which remains for all eternity. He also contrasts the ideas of work and gift. The mention of food assumes the hearers’ hunger or appetite. We all have appetites, whether physical, emotional or spiritual. We get hungry and we want to eat. We have appetites for food and sleep, sex and pleasure, accomplishments and houses, love and acceptance, friendships and God.

Jesus says that there is “food which perishes.” No matter how great the steak dinner we had last night, we will be hungry today. No matter how satisfying the “A” on the test might seem today, tomorrow we will feel the pressure of studying for the next test. No sexual encounter will satisfy our desires once and for all. A room filled with new furniture will leave you

wanting more the next day. Earthly food perishes and dies. It brings but momentary satisfaction.

Hunger for steak is one thing; hunger for love and life is an entirely different matter. The hunger we have for real life runs very deep. But herein lies the problem. How do we try to assuage this hunger? We work to gain earthly food that we hope will satisfy our deepest hunger. We work for status, accomplishments, power, or people to satisfy our appetites for love, freedom and joy. We take a trip around the world. We leave one spouse, hoping the next one will satisfy us. But all of this is the “food which perishes.”

Earthly food never provides the kind of life for which we hunger. So Jesus says that we are not to work for the food which perishes. This doesn’t mean that we should quit our jobs. It means that we are to hunger and eat food that remains to eternal life, food that gives life and satisfies our deepest hungers. Jesus is saying that merely material notions of blessing are not worth pursuing, and that we can’t do any work that will give us eternal blessing. The food that is truly to be desired cannot be gained through effort. It can only be given by the Son of Man.

The Jews ask what works they should do, i.e. what techniques they should employ to achieve this satisfaction. They mistakenly think they have the ability to meet the challenge and work for the food that truly satisfies. They are not really listening to what Jesus is saying.

The answer is that it is not “work” at all. One cannot gain this food by working. The only way one gets this food is by believing in the one whom the Father sent. Believing leads to life; unbelief leads to constant hunger and an appetite that is never satisfied. Jesus is forcing the Jews to think about their goals and priorities and expectations. They seek Jesus because they are hungry for bread, but he wants them to be hungry for life.

So they said to Him, “What then do You do for a sign, so that we may see, and believe You? What work do You perform? Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, ‘He gave them bread out of heaven to eat.’” Jesus then said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, it is not Moses who has given you the bread out of heaven, but it is My Father who gives you the true bread out of heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down out of heaven, and gives life to the world.” Then they said to Him, “Lord, always give us this bread.” (6:30-34)

The crowd wants to know what gives Jesus the authority to give this food. They want a sign. They want to see something tangible before they believe. In actuality, Jesus has just performed a sign, but now they want him to pull a rabbit out of heaven, not a lunch basket. This is always the problem for both Jews and Gentiles. We want to see, then we will believe. But Jesus wants us to believe, then we will see. “Faith in God is less apt to proceed from miracles than miracles from faith in God.”³

The crowd wants Jesus to repeat the sign of Moses, or something even more spectacular. They want manna from heaven. The rabbis argued that the Messiah, the latter Redeemer, would call down manna from heaven, as did Moses, the first Redeemer. The crowd is beginning to grumble, just like the Israelites did in the wilderness. But they are going in the direction that Jesus intends. It was Passover, and the Scripture reading in the synagogue that very day may well have been Exodus 16, which talks about God's provision for his people in the wilderness:

Then the LORD said to Moses, "Behold, I will rain bread from heaven for you; and the people shall go out and gather a day's portion every day, that I may test them, whether or not they will walk in My instruction." ... When the sons of Israel saw it, they said to one another, "What is it?" For they did not know what it was. And Moses said to them, "It is the bread which the LORD has given you to eat." (Exod 16:4, 15)

The sons of Israel ate the manna forty years, until they came to an inhabited land; they ate the manna until they came to the border of the land of Canaan. (Exod 16:35)

The quote in John 6:31 is disputed, but it likely comes from Psalm 78:24:

**He rained down manna upon them to eat
And gave them food from heaven. (Ps 78:24)**

But the quote has echoes of Nehemiah 9:15 and Psalm 105:40 also:

**"You provided bread from heaven for them for their hunger,
You brought forth water from a rock for them for their thirst,
And You told them to enter in order to possess
The land which You swore to give them." (Neh 9:15)**
**They asked, and He brought quail,
And satisfied them with the bread of heaven.
He opened the rock and water flowed out;
It ran in the dry places like a river.
For He remembered His holy word
With Abraham His servant;
And He brought forth His people with joy,
His chosen ones with a joyful shout. (Ps 105:40-43)**

Jesus corrects their wrong theology. It was not Moses but the Father who gave them bread—and he was still the one giving the bread. Jesus is saying that there was too much attention on Moses and not enough on God. For the Jews, the true bread that Moses provided them was Torah, the law. They thought that feeding on Torah would give them life.

Jesus says that the law is not true bread and Torah cannot give life. Only God himself can give true bread, and this bread gives true life. In John's gospel we also find the true temple (2:18), the true feasts (4:21), the true shepherd (10:1), and the true vine (15:1). The true bread, the true Torah, is Jesus himself.

He is the bread of life (6:35, 48). But Jesus does not make that connection yet. The first step is a transition to get the focus off of Moses and Torah. Notice also that Jesus expands the recipients of true bread from the Jews to the world, lost men and women, without distinction.

This Jewish crowd is acting just like the woman at the well. When Jesus offered her living water, she said, "Sir, give me this water, so I will not be thirsty nor come all the way here to draw" (John 4:15). The crowd in Capernaum tells Jesus, "Lord, always give us this bread" (6:34). They are ready to believe that he can give what they seek; they have yet to learn that he is what they need.

I will make two observations from this text.

It is easy for us to misplace our priorities and pursue the wrong bread to satisfy our deepest hungers.

When I was in college, before I met the Lord, I could never go to bed at night. I always had to hang out in the bars or follow the crowd until everyone went home. I was afraid that true bread would be handed out and I would miss it. Looking back over my life, I see how much I sought to gain real life through my physical efforts, my religious efforts, and my relationship with my wife and my children.

What are we working and striving for, expecting to gain real life? We work hard at our jobs, and that is a good thing, but we are hoping that we will be able to gain a nice home and a comfortable life so that we won't hunger. We work at our marriage, and that is another good thing, hoping that marriage will satisfy us completely. We work on raising our family, another good thing, hoping that raising perfect kids will fully satisfy us. We even work at religion, trying to please God, believing that our efforts will somehow win his favor and satisfy our hunger for acceptance and joy. We think we will have peace and contentment if the church we are involved in gets squared away. It's not that we are to do nothing but just sit around, waiting for God. The problem is that we look to our efforts to satisfy our deepest hunger.

Jesus rebukes a purely materialistic notion of the kingdom. He tells us to get our priorities straight and work for what truly matters. If we only pursue the sign, or that which is transient, life will be an endless pursuit of satisfactions that never truly satisfy. We will always be pursuing but never obtaining. Isaiah asks, "Why do you spend your money for what is not bread, and your wages for that what does not satisfy?" (Isa 55:2).

It is hard for us to believe and trust that God will give us what we need.

Deuteronomy 8 (8:3) and Exodus 16 (16:4) declare that manna was given to teach God's people a lesson. God was testing them to see if they would trust him and obey him. Observe what happens in the beginning of chapter 6 of John:

Therefore Jesus, lifting up His eyes and seeing that a large crowd was coming to Him, said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread, so that these may eat?" This He was saying

to test him, for He Himself knew what He was intending to do. (6:5-6)

Jesus was testing his disciples then, and he is still testing his disciples today. Even though we fully understand who Jesus is, it is no different today. We are on a new exodus journey. We have been delivered from slavery to sin and death. We are learning to walk in faith. I really hate this! I want to coast. I want to store up manna. I want a program for getting life, but God wants me to live by trusting in what he gives.

The work of God is believing in him whom he sent, believing that life is the gift of God in the person of Jesus, believing that God will supply what we need from heaven each and every day. We rise every morning believing that God can supply life at work, as we care for our family and interact with people. We let go of our wisdom and efforts as a means of finding life.

Before we start talking about Jesus as the bread of life, and eating his flesh, we need to think about believing that all true life comes from God. We believe in spite of not believing. We even ask God for the faith to believe. We become committed to the idea that life happens supernaturally, every day, all around us. We move from a system of working to giving, from doing to receiving.

We can't start eating the bread of life until we stop ordering junk food. Every situation in life, every pain, every fear, every memory, every encounter with people will evoke a hunger pang. What is our response to that onslaught of hunger? Do we seek Jesus to give us earthly food, food which perishes, or do we believe that life comes from above, as a gift?

The Van Morrison song asks the same question:

When will I ever learn to live in God?
When will I ever learn?
He gives me every thing I need and more,
When will I ever learn?

**“Ho! Every one who thirsts, come to the waters;
And you who have no money come, buy and eat.
Come, buy wine and milk
Without money and without cost.” (Isa 55:1)**

1. Brennan Manning, *A Glimpse of Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper-SanFrancisco, 2004), 24-26.
2. Manning, *A Glimpse of Jesus*, 41.
3. Frederick Beuchner, *Listening To My Life* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 305.

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