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John 6:35-59

Nineteenth Message

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OLD MEMORIES, NEW LIFE

Whenever families gather at holiday times, or even for an occasional dinner, it seems they recount their stories. Every family has its stories, of course. Over time, their memories become sacred. If anyone makes a mistake in the telling, or changes the story, he or she is quickly corrected by the others. At times arguments arise over the correct version of the story. If you have married into such a family, this is the point in the evening when you decide to watch television.

Israel was the family of God, and this family too had their sacred stories. One of the most important of them had to do with their deliverance from Egypt, their Exodus story. One day, Jesus attempted to change that story. He fed a great multitude of people and walked on the sea. The next day he delivered a lengthy discourse that changed the sacred story. He wanted to take the original story to a new level of meaning, to inject new life into an old memory. Naturally, his efforts were met with resistance and much confusion.

In the sixth chapter of John's gospel the twin themes are Passover and Moses, exodus and manna. The bread of life discourse has three distinct movements. Last week we looked at the first. This morning we come the second and third movements. The second begins in verse 35, with Jesus' claim to be the bread of life.

Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life; he who comes to Me will not hunger, and he who believes in Me will never thirst. But I said to you that you have seen Me, and yet do not believe. All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out. For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me. This is the will of Him who sent Me, that of all that He has given Me I lose nothing, but raise it up on the last day. For this is the will of My Father, that everyone who beholds the Son and believes in Him will have eternal life, and I Myself will raise him up on the last day." (John 6:35-40 NASB)

In the first movement we saw that the Father gives true bread. This bread comes down from heaven, like the manna in the wilderness, giving life to the world. The manna of the first Exodus fed the body; the new manna feeds the soul. Jesus exhorts us to work for this true bread rather than seeking substitutes. But the work we perform is not really work. It is believing in the one whom the Father sent. The crowd responded to Jesus' words by requesting that they always receive this bread.

In the second movement, Jesus identifies this bread from heaven, the new manna, as himself. He is the bread of life. He is the bread from heaven. God gives true bread, and this bread is Jesus. Jesus says the same thing in verse 48, which serves as what we could call a bookend to verse 35.

There are many "I am" expressions in John's gospel, but this statement by Jesus, "I am the bread of life," is the first of seven "I am" statements in which there is a predicate:

the bread of life, 6:35, 48
 the light of the world, 8:12
 the door or gate, 10:7, 9
 the good shepherd, 10:11, 14
 the resurrection and the life, 11:25
 the way and the truth and the life, 14:6
 the true vine, 15:1, 5

Jesus says that the one who comes to him will not hunger, and the one who believes in him will not thirst. This sounds much like what he said to the Samaritan woman in chapter 4. Here we see a mixture of metaphorical and non-metaphorical elements: bread of life, and coming and believing. God sent Jesus into the world. Jesus offers us something that we cannot get in the world. He gives us something that is like food and like drink that will satisfy our souls. The food that he offers endures, and the life it sustains goes on into eternity.

What does it mean that we will not hunger or thirst? Is Jesus saying that when we become Christians, we will feel full and content for the rest of our lives? Is he saying that life will be easy, that we won't suffer or have doubts or worries? When we are indwelt by the Holy Spirit, we no longer feel empty in our core. We have a sense of peace and contentment that we did not have before. Our heart, our desires change. However, that does not guarantee that we will have an easy journey. We will face wilderness times. And just as Israel was dependent on manna every day for forty years in the wilderness, so we too will be dependent on the life that God gives to us in Jesus.

When we are hungry we eat; when we are thirsty we drink. If we eat and drink regularly, we won't hunger and thirst. It's the same with our spiritual life. We continually come to Jesus and we believe. When we find ourselves in a situation that is overwhelming, we come to Jesus for life. When we are in conflict with someone, we believe that God can bring life. We don't rely on our religious efforts or our own attempts to supply what we lack in these struggles. We see Jesus as present and able to provide whatever it is that we need in every circum-

stance. We believe in what he tells us to do and we obey. We come and we believe. We keep coming and we keep believing. When we do this we will have real life as a gift from heaven—a constant, abundant, nourishing resource. We will not hunger or thirst.

Now as Jesus goes on to explain how we come and how we believe, we see two additional themes. The first has to do with divine sovereignty in the mystery of salvation.

The Jewish crowd continues to be hungry and thirsty because they see Jesus, but they do not believe. They see the miracle, and they want it—they like the abundance of bread—but they don't want Jesus. Not everyone who sees Jesus will believe. People can read about him and talk about him, but still they do not come to fully trust in him.

However, those who are chosen by the Father will come. All that the Father gives will come to Jesus. The work of salvation is the work of the Father and the Son. It is not human effort. We do not have to be “good enough.” The Father chooses and the Son saves. The Father's actions precede our coming to Jesus. He will welcome all who come, but those who come have already been drawn. The fact that you have given your life to Jesus means that you have been chosen. How else could you believe in the cross? John's argument here negates the manna that the Jews want to eat for salvation, which is the law or Torah.

For the ones whom the Father gives there are three results. When you come to Jesus, he will not cast you out, literally, cast outside. The love of Jesus is complete; it has no limits. No matter what you do, Jesus will not reject you. Secondly, those whom the Father gives to the Son will have the gift of eternal life immediately. Eternity begins the moment you commit yourself to Jesus. And thirdly, Jesus will raise you up on the last day. He actually says this twice. He will keep and preserve the ones the Father gives until the day when the new heavens and new earth are revealed.

Notice that the results of believing are past, present, and future. The sin of the past is blotted out and the sinner is accepted. The present is lived with the life of heaven in fellowship with God. The future is secure because in the end, Jesus will raise up those who belong to him. As a result of a divine choice we have total and complete salvation.

Sometimes we imagine that we made a choice to believe in Jesus, but that is not accurate. I didn't become a believer until I was 22 years old, even though I went to church every Sunday. I thought that on a certain day in May 1972, I made a decision for Jesus. But after I committed my life to him I began to see how God had been at work, drawing me to himself throughout my early years. And even though I deserted God when I went to college, he eagerly welcomed me in. Ever since that day his life has been with me. When I contemplate his choice of me, I want to fall on my knees.

The other theme that we see in these verses is the obedience of the Son. The reason why Jesus will preserve the ones

whom the Father has given him is because he does the will of the Father. He came down from heaven for this purpose. And the Father's will is that the Son would not lose any of those whom the Father had given him. Notice the parallelism of verses 39 and 40:

- A “This is the will of Him who sent Me,
 B that of all that He has given Me I lose nothing,
 C but raise it up on the last day.
 A' “For this is the will of My Father,
 B' that everyone who beholds the Son and
 believes in Him will have eternal life,
 C' and I Myself will raise him up on the last day.”

The A and C lines are identical. The B line, “that of all that He has given Me I lose nothing,” means that we will always have eternal life. This is the work of the Son, because he was obedient to the will of the Father. “Jesus can speak these words because he claims nothing for himself but is simply the humble, meek, obedient child of his Father. It is in his nothingness that his fullness consists, because only so is he the bearer of the true life which does not seek to climb up to heaven but comes down from heaven.”¹

How wonderfully reassuring are these words of Jesus. Because of him we have total salvation and total security. We will never be lost or rejected. We always have life, and he will raise us up on the last day.

Now we come to the response of the Jews to these words.

Therefore the Jews were grumbling about Him, because He said, “I am the bread that came down out of heaven.” They were saying, “Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How does He now say, ‘I have come down out of heaven?’” (6:41-42)

This is the first time that the term “the Jews,” referring to the Jewish leadership, appears in this chapter. The Jews were good, religious people. Here they are murmuring and grumbling like their fathers did during the first Exodus (Exod 16:2, 8-9, Num 11:4, Psalm 78.) The Jews are upset because Jesus claims to be the bread that came down from heaven. They think they know who Jesus is. He is the son of Joseph, who lives in Capernaum. They think they know the identity of Jesus' Father, but Jesus repeatedly claims that they do not know his Father at all. They are perturbed that Jesus claims divine heritage.

Jesus answered and said to them, “Do not grumble among yourselves. No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day. It is written in the prophets, ‘And they shall all be taught of God.’ Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father, comes to Me. Not that anyone has seen the Father, except the One who is from God; He has seen the Father. Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life.” (6:43-48)

Verse 48 repeats verse 35 and marks the end of the second movement of the discourse. Verse 47 repeats what Jesus said

to Nicodemus in chapter 3. Here again we see the sovereignty of God in his divine choice. Jesus says that we can only come if the Father draws us. Again we see that the ones whom the Father draws will be raised up on the last day.

But now, coming and believing become hearing and learning. Jesus quotes Isaiah 54:13 in verse 45: “all your sons will be taught of the Lord.” Isaiah’s word, addressed to the exiles in Babylon, looked forward to the restored city of Jerusalem, to the time when God’s people would hear from the Lord directly. We can hear only if we are taught by God. We can be taught by God only if we hear Jesus, because he is the only one who has seen the Father. If Jesus is the only one who reflects the image of the Father, what does that say about Christianity compared to every other religion?

What is Jesus saying? The Jews will not find the answer by trying to understand, based on their framework. And neither will we. Human wisdom is of no help. One can come to God only by responding to his drawing and by listening to him. We need internal illumination. The Jews can read Torah all they want, but without illumination from God, the words will never enter their hearts and become alive by the Spirit. The true children of God are receptive to what the Father teaches.

This is why people can come to church every week and listen to sermon after sermon, but never truly understand or embrace Jesus. In high school I even gave the message for an Easter sunrise service, but my heart had not yet been illuminated. I did not yet understand. But when I read the Bible after I received the Holy Spirit, my heart burned within me. This is one of the reasons we are committed to expository preaching here at PBCC. We want you to be taught by God, not by us. We open God’s word and trust that he will illuminate your heart and you will hear personally from him. The work of the pastor is to present God’s word and then get out of the way.

In the third movement, Jesus raises the stakes even higher.

“Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread which comes down out of heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down out of heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread also which I will give for the life of the world is My flesh.” (6:49-51)

In the first movement Jesus said that God gives true bread from heaven. In the second movement he said that he is that bread. Now in this third movement he says that this bread is his flesh, and he will go on to say that we have to eat his flesh and drink his blood. His words now become completely metaphorical.

The manna in the wilderness had no power to save. It nourished the body, but people still died. Manna could not give eternal life. Jesus is the living bread, the bread of life. This bread is his body, his flesh. In his death, Jesus will give his flesh for the world, for both Jews and Gentiles. Jesus is telling the Jews that studying Torah without him is the same as eating

manna in the wilderness. Unless they eat his flesh they can’t have life.

Then the Jews began to argue with one another, saying, “How can this man give us His flesh to eat?” (6:52)

This last comment really pushes the limits. The Jews are repulsed, just as we would be by the thought of cannibalism. They were very careful about how they prepared their food. Drinking blood was forbidden, as was eating meat that had not been drained of blood. They are struggling to understand what Jesus means. They are getting worked up and asking how this can happen.

So Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in yourselves. He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. For My flesh is true food, and My blood is true drink. He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him. As the living Father sent Me, and I live because of the Father, so he who eats Me, he also will live because of Me. This is the bread which came down out of heaven; not as the fathers ate and died; he who eats this bread will live forever.” These things He said in the synagogue as He taught in Capernaum. (6:53-59)

Notice that verse 58 is like a bookend to verse 49. The third movement begins and ends with the fathers eating and dying in the wilderness. Notice also that the words “eat” and “feed” dominate vv. 49-58. Two different Greek words are used ten times in these ten verses (49, 50, 51, 52, 53, 54, 56, 57, 58). Up to this point, the words which Jesus used had been coming and believing, hearing and learning. Now it is eating and drinking.

Further, there is an allusion here to the Lord’s Supper. Scholars debate whether John was making a point about the sacrament. Some think that communion was being neglected and that John is lobbying for the importance of the sacrament. Others hold the opposing viewpoint—that the church was making too much of the sacrament and John wants them get back to Jesus. I am wary of making this connection. I agree with one scholar who states: “Jn. 6 is not about the Lord’s Supper; rather, the Lord’s Supper is about what is described in Jn. 6.”²

If John wanted to refer to the Lord’s Supper, he would have used the word “body,” not “flesh.” “Flesh” connects to 1:14, where John says, “the Word became flesh.” The important thing to remember is that life is in Jesus, not the sacrament. “Augustine defined a sacrament as a ‘visible word’ or an ‘outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace.’”³

So what does it mean to eat Jesus’ flesh and drink his blood? First, that Jesus is the new covenant meal. Jesus is not talking about cannibalism. Remember that the context here is Passover. The Jews ate the lamb at Passover and entered into the covenant meal—the meat and the wine. Now Jesus is changing the story. Covenant life is not found in the Passover meal.

Life is in him. The covenant is fulfilled in him. Jesus is the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

This is a hard word for the Jews, because they love their story, their memories. Jesus is taking the old story and giving it new life. If you have Jesus, you have life. If you don't, you will die. Other foods, including manna, have value, but Jesus' flesh and blood are true food and true drink because they provide eternal life. The Father has life in himself. He sent the Son, who also has life. If we eat of him we too have that life. We do not have life in ourselves, but only in him.

The other thing that eating and drinking speaks to is intimacy. When we eat and drink, we abide in Jesus and he abides in us. This idea of abiding is important for the relationship of the Trinity and for that of Christ and the believer. Jesus will speak about this more fully with his disciples in the upper room. God's desire is for us to be totally immersed in the life of Jesus. Eating and drinking are like living and breathing. Jesus is woven into the very fabric of our being. Our body is his body; our blood is his blood. We have no life outside his life. When we are not eating and drinking, we are starving, refusing the food and the drink that will bring eternal life into our very being.

My wife has a lot of interests. A current one is collecting sea shells. We have bowls of sea shells all over our house. One could say metaphorically that she lives and breathes shells. Gary Vanderet loves basketball. One could say he lives and breathes basketball. I am from Nebraska, and Nebraska football flows in my veins. Brian Morgan loves poetry. He lives and breathes it. We are always feeding on something, drinking something in, whether it's television, movies, music, sports, books, relationships, adventure, or business ventures. None of these things is bad in itself, but do we live and breathe Jesus?

We get married because we long for an intimate relationship. Sex in marriage is an expression of this intimacy. Often when we think of this kind of intimacy we use metaphors like eating and drinking. Our deepest desire is to possess and be possessed, to know and to be known. This desire is fulfilled through an intimate relationship with Jesus. There are many substitutes, even religion, but none of these gives eternal life. Jesus wants us to be absorbed, immersed, united with him. When we are, that is when we are eating and drinking the new and true covenant.

There is a big difference between believing in something and being totally immersed in it. Frederick Buechner has an excellent word for us in this regard:

Believing in God is an intellectual position. It need have no more effect on your life than believing in Freud's method of interpreting dreams or the theory that Sir Francis Bacon wrote *Romeo and Juliet*.

Believing God is something else again. It is less a position than a journey, less a realization than a relationship. It doesn't leave you cold, like believing the world is round. It stirs your blood, like believing the world is a miracle. It affects who you are and what you do with your life like, believing your house is on fire or somebody loves you.

We believe in God when for one reason or another we choose to do so. We believe God when somehow we run into God in a way that by and large leaves us no choice to do otherwise.

When Jesus says that whoever believes "into" him shall never die, he does not mean that to be willing to sign your name to the Nicene Creed guarantees eternal life. Eternal life is not the result of believing in. It is the experience of believing.⁴

May God illuminate our hearts so that we can hear the words of Jesus; and not just hear them, but feed on the very flesh that he gave for the life of the world. "[M]an does not live by bread alone, but man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the LORD" (Deut 8:3). Jesus is the Word of God become flesh.

1. Lesslie Newbigin, *The Light Has Come* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 81.

2 B. Klappert, "Lord's Supper," in *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 2:535.

3. D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 281.

4. Frederick Buechner, *Whistling in the Dark* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco), 1988), 22.