

Our Gospel reading this morning is the third in a series of five readings from Chapter 6 of the Gospel of John. These readings are all connected, all part of what many Bible commentators and interpreters call “The Bread of Life Discourse.” The way John tells the story, right after performing the miracle of the loaves and fishes Jesus begins a long teaching, in which he gradually unpacks the meaning of the miracle for the crowd. This is the typical teaching method Jesus uses in John’s Gospel. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all show Jesus teaching with parables: short, pithy sayings or stories that surprise you into experiencing God’s grace in a new way. But John shows Jesus teaching with a very different method: John shows Jesus teaching in long discourses, where Jesus takes a symbol or metaphor that’s a familiar part of Jewish faith—things like water, light, blindness, the Good Shepherd—and kind of rings the changes on it, as if Jesus walks around that symbol and shows it to us from different angles, until his listeners see there is much more in the symbol than they thought there was, until the symbol grasps them in a new way and draws them into experiencing God’s grace in Jesus in a way they hadn’t imagined before. That’s what happens in these readings from Chapter 6: Jesus walks around the symbol of bread until it means something quite different from what his listeners first thought it meant.

The passage we read today is the second step in that walk around the symbol. In step one, which we heard last week, Jesus connected himself with the manna, the bread from heaven, that God gave through the ministry of Moses to keep the people alive in the wilderness. Jesus took the symbol of bread and added the meaning of it pointing beyond the historical manna to his present self. “I am the living bread that comes from heaven,” Jesus says. But that causes the people a problem. “How can he come from heaven?” they say. “We know where he comes from: he comes from Joseph and Mary. We know his family. We know his origins, and they’re no different from ours. Where does he get off saying he comes from heaven?” The people know where Jesus comes from, and therefore they think they know all they need to know about him.

And that’s when Jesus takes his second step around the symbol. The bread that comes from heaven is more than just food, he tell them. The bread that comes from heaven is what gives life—and what gives life even more than food is the teaching that comes from God: the Word of God that calls existence into being, the Wisdom of God that enters our souls and makes us friends of God, the Spirit of God that breathes life, new life, holy life, into our mortal bodies. The living bread is more than just manna or loaves and fishes; the living bread is the one who bears the life that comes from heaven. And the life that comes from heaven, Jesus says, is to be found in him.

What Jesus is trying to get his listeners to understand with this surprising new meaning of bread, this second step around the symbol, is that coming from earth and coming from heaven are not necessarily two separate and exclusive things. The people think it’s an either/or: either Jesus comes from Joseph and Mary, or he comes from God; either Jesus is human, or he is divine; it’s just that cut and dried, and never the twain shall meet. But Jesus wants them to see something different. Jesus wants them to see that being human and being divine in fact go together. Jesus wants them to see that the life that comes from our parents, the life that is nourished with loaves and fishes, can work *together* with the life that comes from heaven—that the life of God can come into our lives now and make us more alive, abundantly alive, vital and vibrant and full of energy to work the works of God in all our earthly works. Jesus is trying to get the people to see that coming from Joseph and Mary and coming from God is not an either/or but a both/and—and because it’s a both/and for Jesus, he can help it become a both/and for them as well. The question is whether they’re willing to see that, whether the people are willing to go beyond their either/or thinking and see things in a depth dimension, see things with that third dimension of faith Jim Gilman talked about in his sermon a few weeks ago—the question is whether the people are willing to see that Jesus’ human words and human actions have a divine origin and a divine dimension and a divine meaning, and whether, if they can see that about Jesus, they’ll be willing to see that about themselves. Can they see *their* actions as alive with the life that comes from heaven?

In a way, it’s that same question that animates our Epistle reading today. In this passage from Ephesians, Paul—or, more likely, a second-generation follower of Paul writing under Paul’s name—gives the Christian community in Ephesus some basic moral advice, some fundamental ethical teaching. Do not lie, the writer says; speak the truth; don’t nurse your anger until it starts to eat away at you, but forgive; do not steal; work to have

something, and then share what you have; don't use your words to tear each other down, but speak in order to build each other up; don't be bitter or wrangling or slanderous, but be kind. Now in one way all these moral aphorisms are pretty ordinary. There's nothing about them that is peculiarly devotional or religious or spiritual. They're the sort of moral precepts that we might expect any basically decent, reasonably ethical, fundamentally rational person to accept. They're pretty down-to-earth, common-sense, human bits of courtesy. And yet, the letter-writer says, these basic human moral actions are also, at the same time, divine realities. When we put away falsehood and speak the truth, the epistoler says, we are imitating the truthfulness of God. When we don't steal but share what we've worked for, the epistoler says, we are imitating the generosity of God. When we are kind and tender-hearted and forgiving, the epistoler says, we are imitating the way God in Christ has forgiven us. Doing these apparently simple human things in reality makes us imitators of God—and the word used here in Greek for “imitator” means more than making a superficial likeness, but means really reproducing in ourselves what comes to us from God. When we strive to live a life of genuine human love, the letter tells us, we are really living into the way Christ loves us. The challenge the letter puts before the Ephesians is to look at their own very human actions, their own striving to live in love, and to recognize in that the presence of God, to recognize in that the love of Christ, to recognize in their lives the life that comes from heaven to make them more abundantly alive.

If that's the challenge the Epistle puts before the Ephesians, and if that's the challenge Jesus put before his hearers, then that's the challenge the scriptures put before us today, too. Can we look at *our* actions and see them, in Christ, animated with a life that is larger than our own? Can we look at the ordinary, everyday, human things that *we* do and recognize them as alive with the life that comes from heaven?

One time a couple of months ago I was in the vesting room getting ready for a service. And I was kind of nattering, kind of anxious about getting everything ready, getting everything just right so I could give a good liturgical performance. And Carol and the choir were in the loft, practicing a piece for the service; and at the same time a fire truck or some other emergency vehicle went roaring up Johnson St, siren screeching as it went. And because I was in the vesting room and could hear both of these things, I heard one moment when the chord the organ was playing, and the notes the choir was singing, and the tone the siren was making all came together, so that what had been just sounds clashing against each other as noise resolved itself into a strange and unexpected kind of harmony. Now you could look at that and say it was nothing special, just a coincidence, perfectly natural, completely earthly. But for me at that moment there was also something of heaven about it, some glimpse of an extra dimension of meaning, a little revelation of how God can take things that are odd and clashing and out of place, and can weave them together into grace and beauty. And that one little moment helped me go back to preparing for the service, less anxious about my liturgical performance and more mindful about weaving together the people's prayers into the prayer we could all offer to God. That moment brought me a little touch of the life that comes from heaven.

Or another time, at a clergy meeting I was part of back in Minnesota, we were discussing something that was kind of controversial, something that had the potential to be divisive in our congregations. And as we talked about it you could feel the anxiety level starting to rise, you could even begin to feel some anger gathering around the different sides of the issue. Until one member of the group said, “Wait a minute. We all know we're not going to agree about this, this issue is too complex for us to settle here. But we also know that we're all here because we care about staying in communion with each other, and working together for the mission of Christ. Let's just try to keep that in mind when we talk about this.” That one little comment changed the whole tenor of the discussion. We still didn't agree, and we still had a lot of work to do to hash out the issue. But from that moment on the conversation became more lively, more engaging, because instead of trying to grind our own axes, we were really trying to listen to each other, we were doing our best to care for each other, and in that earthly caring, in that common courtesy, we felt a touch of the compassion and life that comes from heaven.

And that is the promise these scriptures make to us, too: that if we are willing to open our eyes, if we are willing to look to Jesus and see in his earthly life the life that comes from heaven, then he will share that life with us, he will help us to know the life that comes from heaven in all our earthly actions and moments and experiences and lives as well. “I am the living bread that came down from heaven,” Jesus said; and today, in this Eucharist, he gives us his bread to nourish our lives with eternal life. Let it be so with us. Amen.