

**March 24, 2019 “Imperfect believers: Bread of Heaven to Earth Come Down” John 6:24-35
Second Presbyterian Church, Baltimore**

The Rev. Dr. Tom Blair

“They found Jesus on the other side of the lake. ‘Rabbi,’ they asked, ‘when did you come here?’ Jesus replied, ‘In very truth I tell you, it is not because you saw signs that you came looking for me, but because you ate the bread and your hunger was satisfied. You should work, not for this perishable food, but for the food that lasts, the food of eternal life.

‘This food the Son of Man will give you, for on him God the Father has set the seal of his authority.’ ‘Then what must we do’, they asked him, ‘if our work is to be the work of God?’ Jesus replied, ‘This is the work that God requires: to believe in the one whom he has sent.’

They asked, ‘What sign can you give us, so that we may see it and believe you? What is the work you are doing? Our ancestors had manna to eat in the desert; as scripture says, “He gave them bread from heaven to eat.”’

Jesus answered, ‘In very truth I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven; it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. The bread that God gives comes down from heaven and brings life to the world.’

‘Sir,’ they said to him, ‘give us this bread now and always.’

Jesus said to them, ‘I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.

God’s love is amazing. That God’s love is transmitted in such a simple but profound and lasting way as through Baptism [the two infants baptisms we celebrated at the 9 AM service], is beyond me; but it is something I’ll be eternally grateful for. It is also something frankly hard to understand, to unravel and parse out in each of our own imperfect ways, but it is always worth our while. The best I can do, each and every morning first thing as I begin to wake up - is to give thanks for another day ahead... to take a deep breath of gratefulness and trust that the grace of God that brought me through the night will carry me through another day ahead.

There is a deep well of hope we can draw from in faith and tradition, and the Gospel of John is one of the deepest wells I know. I always take a deep breath before reading any passage of John’s Gospel because I know from experience that I will be simultaneously confused, perplexed and inspired- which, at least for me, is an odd combination of feelings to have at the same time. As an imperfect disciple myself, there are good reasons for my wonderings, all that have to do with the nature and intent of John’s writing, which for today’s purposes I’d like to put into three categories; **context, content** and **contact...**

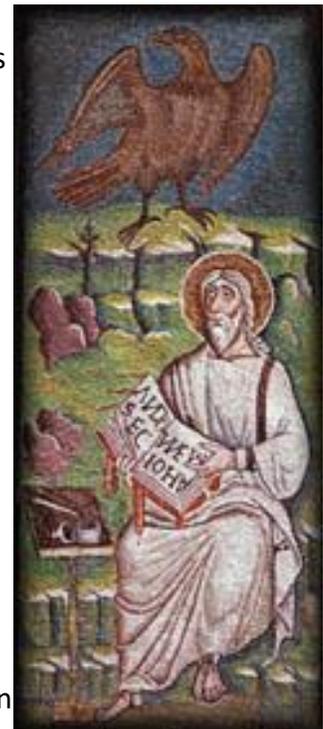
Let me explain. In trying to understand the **context**; we begin by understanding John's perspective in writing. Interestingly, we know that the symbol given for John's Gospel is the Eagle, a being who can see from incredible distances and heights, and who, according to early medieval scholars, could look directly into the sun (symbolic of looking straight into the eyes of God.) You could say that John's Gospel takes a view of Jesus' life and ministry from 30,000 feet, a long-distance view, both in time and space. This is because John's was the last gospel written, perhaps in 90 to 110 A.D., and because it was physically written outside Palestine, perhaps in Ephesus, either by John, one of the original disciples, or from his gathered remembrances and writings after his death.

John had more time to process his memories than the other Gospel writers, and he writes from a different point of view. The church he writes from is in living in divisive times, from disagreements with those in the Synagogues to those with the Roman authorities and perhaps even with some followers of John the Baptist, who now were left behind without a leader.

It was becoming increasingly clear that Christ's community on earth was here to stay for some time; Jesus' imminent earthly return had not come upon them, and messages of encouragement and inspiration from Jesus were more important than past details of his life and times.

The accounts of Jesus walking on water, feeding the multitudes and other events that John describes help to create a seamless worldview of an already risen Jesus, an omniscient and mercy-filled miracle worker who teaches with the wisdom of heaven come down to earth. His soliloquies, unlike anything in the other gospel accounts, combine wisdom and mystery into wordplays that require careful reading and give ample cause to ponder.

When we encounter John's Gospel, we get a sense of the combined forces of devout majesty, community fragmentation and a divine storyline that seem far beyond our line of vision. And that's OK. That's why I always take a deep breath before reading anything of John, because



The eagle is the symbol for the gospel of John.

there's always something bigger than I know going on inside the reading. As holy scripture, it can speak to me and you as well as it did for dozens of generations of people before us, stirring up more deep and meaningful questions than many other parts of scripture.

Finally there's this; from 30,000 feet we can't always see as clearly as John did, so it's more than fair for us to be able to ask questions; and it's just as fair for us to be surprised at the answers we receive in our asking.

Which brings us to the **content** of this portion of the gospel account. Our passage today follows some notable events on the other side of the lake (Galilee); a feeding of the multitudes and Jesus' walk on the water, presumably his unique way of catching up with the disciples as they crossed from one side of the lake to the other. This is when the imperfection of the crowds (whether believers or not) really begins to stand out. It seems pretty clear that the crowds simply wanted to follow after Jesus as a source of food. They had been fed the day before on one side of the lake and when Jesus crossed over to the other side, the crowds just followed. (That's what crowds do, isn't it?) Jesus calls them on it right away.

He says to them what they clearly already know, and much more. This is one of those typical Johannine back-and-forth exchanges that can be confusing on multiple levels. Jesus refers to himself in the third person (as the Son of Man), in roundabout language that glosses over their ignorance with his wisdom. They are clearly looking for food and also know that they are in the presence of a very special person; how special is beyond their understanding (and ours too!)

They tell Jesus that they are ready to do what it takes to earn their bread, and Jesus tells them that their work is to believe; to have faith in him. Then they ask for a sign, which Jesus is more than ready to provide. The sign he gives them is not exactly what they have in mind. While the crowd anticipates something similar to what Moses did for those who followed him into the wilderness following their escape from Egypt so many years before, providing manna from heaven, at least a bite for breakfast to keep them from starving, Jesus is ready to provide 'true bread' from heaven. The crowd seems ready to settle for this, though they don't know what Jesus means.



Then he shares the ‘quotable quote’, that he himself is the “bread of life; that those who come to him will never hunger and those who believe will never thirst.”

That’s the **content** of the passage for us today that we imperfectly try to understand. We’re in good company with the crowds and disciples.

Now we see how this message makes **contact** with us. Maybe we can understand this better than the first crowds and disciples; maybe....

Richard Rohr, a Biblical scholar and Franciscan priest, provides some helpful words about all this. He reminds us that “Christ” is not Jesus’ last name but a ‘descriptive identifier.’ Jesus is the Christ, the human connector between heaven and earth, the Messiah who ushers in a new way of living and understanding, both in ancient times and even today. We have been imperfectly understanding Jesus’ message for 2,000 years now, but that doesn’t stop us from trying to get it right. That’s one reason we’re here this morning, isn’t it; to give thanks for the One who made the connection and who has shared with us a Spirit of love and understanding of what it means for us here and now.

If Jesus wasn’t encouraging his disciples and the crowds to believe more than they already did, then I don’t know what he was doing. He asks the same from us.

We’re not here this morning asking for bread (although the pancakes we’ll have later on will be pretty tasty!) But my guess is that some of us are here searching for meaning, connection, and yes, ‘more faith’ than we now have. And I’ve spent this past week and more trying to figure out what it really means to have more faith.

This story from John might be more helpful than it first appears. Jesus didn’t deny that the bread he multiplied was a good thing. But it wasn’t a lasting thing. It was good, it met a real need; it was welcomed with thanks; it was shared; it was collected afterward so that nothing would be lost. Yet, if that is why people followed Jesus then they were sure to be disappointed because the physical bread that Jesus miraculously multiplied did not last. What Jesus offers, instead of the bread that he gives out, is the bread that he *is*.

So, Jesus is not the bread-giver, but the bread itself. What in the world does that mean? How do we understand that and take that in?

To take this to the next step, I've been thinking about the "I am" sayings of John's gospel and the various forms that Jesus' presence takes.

Jesus offers the *way* that he is, the *life* that he is, the *truth* that he is, the *resurrection* that he is. In John, Jesus uses the "I am" sayings to self-identify in specific but not literal ways: as bread, light (of the world), the way, truth and life, door, Good Shepherd, the resurrection and the life and the vine (with us as the branches.)

All this has led me to a question I've been asking for much longer than this past week. What forms does Jesus' body take? – if he can be bread, what else can he be? Is Jesus' name a magical incantation? Or is his name, reputation and presence in itself inspiration and encouragement for our lives?

This past week I've been given a way of thinking of the meaning of Christ in a way I've never before considered. I've started reading another book, Holy Envy, written by Barbara Brown Taylor, an Episcopal priest and instructor of a World Religions 101 class at Piedmont College, in Georgia, for the past 15 years or so.

Into this class come mostly freshman, looking for a class without a lot of math or science, with lots of field trips, too (Atlanta is only 90 minutes away.) Early in her book, after sharing some wonderful accounts of students (and their parents) who discover that the course is not about refuting World Religions, but rather seeking to understand them, she begins to delve in some symbolism and story.

She begins with Hinduism, describing the meaning of a common statue in that tradition, of Shiva Nataraja. It appears odd to "Christian eyes", clearly pagan- she says. There is a 'god' of some sort with multiple arms, stomping on a poor person crouched below. At least that is how 'Western Eyes' see it. With a visit to the nearby Hindu Temple, though, she and her class find out something very different than what they thought they were looking at.

The crouching figure below is a person who is so caught up in their own world that they cannot be bothered to look up. Rather than 'stomping' on the person below, this 'Shiva' figure is inviting the person to the dance of



the universe, celebrating the wonders of life. The statue is a celebration of life rather than a condemnation, completely opposite of the imagined meaning of so many.

Now, here's my story about this, and how "Christ" appeared in it. Yesterday, (March 23) was a sunny enough day that I was out in my front yard, raking out leaves from under the shrubs in the front of my little house.

My neighbor, Dr. Singh, was out too, doing the same thing. I know he is Hindu, (and that he also teaches Economics at Morgan State.) He knows that I am a Christian Pastor, and that I've asked him religious questions before. So I asked him about the "Shiva statue" - and explained to him what Barbara Brown Taylor says that it really symbolizes. He replied very straightforwardly, saying "Well, yes, I suppose that is a good way to describe it. Of course" he continued, "there is always more than one way to look at it." Then we continued our conversation a bit longer, as much about the nice weather we're having as about the meaning of symbolism within Hindu and Christian traditions.

One other footnote about the "Shiva statue." Barbara Brown Taylor says that Sydney Carter, the composer of the hymn, "Lord of the Dance" (#157 in our Hymnbook) actually had such a statue in his study when he composed the hymn, in 1963.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lord_of_the_Dance_\(hymn\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lord_of_the_Dance_(hymn))

Now the point I'm making is both about how it we recognize the joy and wonder of life around us and how remarkable it is that we can celebrate together the life God gives us.

If Christ is anything meaningful to us at all, Christ comes to join us together, in fellowship, in questions, in welcome, in friendship, in neighborliness and hospitality.

It is Christ who draws us together and does not divide us. Christ is 'bread' to us when we are fed in joy and wonder, in learning and understanding, in sharing compassion, care and giving of ourselves to this world that God so loves.

It is this Christ who calls each one of us to live and love, be connected in every possible way we can be, to share and serve, in the name of Jesus, each and every way we can. And as we do that, we ourselves are fed by the Spirit in God's Holy name. Amen.

