

Life and Light outside the Lines
John 6:35-59

Good morning and greetings from FoH....

There's a lot going on in John chapter 6! One of the things about the Narrative Lectionary is, unlike the Common Lectionary, we don't just get a bite-sized piece of Scripture each week. Instead, we get a big, chewy serving! I'm not complaining. In fact, perhaps especially in this dialogue about "bread of life," this bigger portion gives us a fuller perspective than if we just had an excerpt. And we also get the flavor of John's genius storytelling; he's a literary master!

In the background of today's story is death. In prior stories we've heard that Jesus is collecting enemies; there are a growing number of people who want to kill him. And in v 4 of this chapter, John reminds us that Passover is near. As listeners, we know that Jesus will, in fact, be killed then. It is within this context, with imminent death overshadowing, that Jesus talks about the bread of life. He speaks life into death.

There are a couple of other literary details to make sure we see. One is the way the story is told, how it builds. It's circular. The chapter begins with a feeding of 5,000: bread to feed the hungry masses. And it continues, on the other side of the water, with bread becoming flesh and flesh being bread. It's here on the other side of the lake that Jesus declares, "I AM the bread of life." And then there's a repeating refrain of "the last day" and "eternal life." And then Jesus is connecting himself to the Father and to us. All of it, turning and circling, endlessly.... John's storytelling creates for us a sense of this life without end that Jesus is talking about.

Some people say, or, some theology says that eternal life is talking about the end of life, or heaven. But this story confuses and denies that meaning. At one point Jesus says he'll "raise you up on the last day" so that you'll have eternal life. Only to turn it around, saying

those who eat living bread will have eternal life and he will resurrect them on the last day. In this dialogue, time is outside the lines of our linear understandings of time. Eating living bread...and being resurrected on the last day...and having eternal life...are in a dance that circles and swirls.

There's another movement, a pulse, if you will. In v 37 Jesus says that "anyone who comes to me I will never *drive away*." Then in v 43 he draws a contrast, saying, "No one can come to me unless *drawn by* the Father." This contrast matters when we remember that John is telling a creation story, that he's re-storying creation. The verb, "drive away," or "expel" is the verb used to describe what happened to Cain, and then to Hagar. Or Pharaoh driving out the Hebrew people after the plagues. And it's what God's people did when they entered new lands, driving out the indigenous of the land. This creation story that Jesus is telling is being written outside the lines of expulsion...outside the lines of colonization. In this creation story, Jesus is showing us that, from the beginning...in the beginning...God has been drawing people...finding...gathering people into the life and light of the One, Living God. We get an image of God's power to draw us in in chapter 21 when the disciples are fishing and they draw so many fish that the nets tear.

And then we come to the part of the story, the teaching, about Jesus being the bread of life, and that we're to eat his flesh and drink his blood. When we listen to these words at their literal level, it's hard to listen. We likely have a variety of adjectives to describe our distaste for such graphic imagery. And this is where I think it's especially important to pay attention to John's brilliant storytelling. We put his Gospel in a category of its own because of how he tells the Jesus story. John, the mystic, writes his gospel with metaphor and mystery. How then shall we hear and understand him talking about eating flesh so that we'll never be hungry?

If we listen to these words about eating with the opening words of John's Gospel, the metaphor is less elusive. And perhaps also less offensive. "In the beginning was the word...and the word became flesh." From the opening of this Gospel, John shows Jesus confusing the lines that usually separate the physical from the spiritual, the literal from the metaphor. "In the beginning was the word...and the word became flesh." In the Genesis creation story, God spoke a word. And it was so. With a word, it was manifested in the physical world—God's word was made flesh.

We may tend to think of God's word being the Bible, but that's a pretty modern understanding. Throughout the Hebrew Bible, perhaps especially in the Psalms, we hear that God's word is visible...is made flesh...in the mountains and trees...in all of creation. God spoke all of it into being with a word. John picks up this story of the word being made flesh...and Jesus, with the rest of creation, becomes God's word made flesh. Literally...and metaphorically. Physically...and spiritually.

So when Jesus says, "I am the bread of life," he's in the tradition of the ancient poets and prophets who used the metaphor of "bread" to talk about God's word. And eating God's word is also familiar. There's the psalmist, praising God's word, saying "it's sweeter than honey." And Ezekiel's vivid image of eating scrolls. In the feeding of the 5,000, that precedes the discourse we're working with—a story that each of the Gospel writers tell—John colors outside the lines of literal and metaphor. Because, after all, the light that has come into the world cannot be contained by any lines we've drawn. And, with the feeding of the 5,000 story, he is also setting us up for the teaching he's about to give on the bread of life.

We know the story well. 5,000 people are fed with five loaves of bread. But notice that detail: there are 5 loaves. There aren't 3, or 7. There are 5. With 5 loaves, the storyteller

means for us to remember the 5 scrolls of *torah*. And where does the bread come from? It hasn't been catered. It doesn't come down from heaven. Nor is it bread that God has spoken into being.... Remarkably...miraculously...mysteriously...this bread comes *from within the people* themselves. They already have the bread! But they didn't seem to know, or they didn't recognize its nourishing and multiplying and lifegiving power until Jesus called it out of them. They already had the word of God within them! Surely this is an enactment and a fulfillment of Jeremiah 33, "I will put my *torah* within them, and I will write it on their hearts."

As Jesus faces into his certain death, he's not only teaching but also showing his disciples...and us...the nature and power of the light that is the world, a power that fills our hungry bodies and beings with life and aliveness. "I *AM* the bread of life." As Jesus anticipates his death, with absolute calm and conviction, he asserts, "I *AM* the bread of life." He's standing in the confidence that he is living out of...and into his Father's purpose. He and his heavenly Father—his spiritual Parent—are absolutely aligned. He is not only *from* God but he is *with* God, *beside* God. And he insists that even in death, he will lose "nothing of all that [God] has given [him]." He will die, he will be betrayed and denied, he will be unjustly accused and convicted...*and*...he will lose nothing because everything he has been given will be raised up on the last day. Even death is within the light and life of the living God. *This*...this is why we eat the bread of life. We eat living bread so that the word of God becomes flesh in us and through us. We eat living bread to become participants in eternal life...and to experience...again and again...in this life...the resurrecting life and aliveness of the living God.

Friends, if ever there was a time to eat the bread of life, it is now. Death is clamoring and threatening all around. In the deep and endless violence of white supremacy, in the vitriol of

politics, in the Doctrine of Discovery's ongoing cruelty and dis-regard of indigenous people, in the devastation and displacement caused by global warming. And the utter fatigue of a seemingly endless pandemic. The list goes on and on. Sharp divisions and dividing lines that can only lead to death have been drawn. And we find ourselves caught up in the mess of it all...sometimes on this side and sometimes on that side of a line. Or we find ourselves drawing our own lines, expelling some...including others. And, even as people of faith, as followers of Jesus, we are tempted by clouds of despair, hopelessness, fear. It is hard to be surrounded by so much death.... To numb our pain and to satisfy our desire for good and light and aliveness, we find ourselves reaching for easy bread, anything that tastes good in the moment, anything that promises quick and easy relief. But as soon as we've eaten it, we're as hungry as we've ever been.

It is now, when all our efforts to end the divisions, when all our efforts to make this a more just and peaceful world seem futile, it is now that we are invited to eat the living bread of the living God. It is now that we are being asked to chew on God's word. Now is the time to hear Jesus say, "I AM.... I Am the bread of life.... I Am living bread...." Jesus is showing us how to eat this literal and living bread that we can only speak of in metaphor. Our efforts will keep us living within the limits and lines that we are bound to perpetuate. But when we're consuming living bread, we're able to see the light and aliveness of God that is beyond any and every line we draw. It is now that we are invited to trust the light and aliveness of the living God, the God who is creating the world with a word—a word of grace, mercy, justice, love, forgiveness. Words being made flesh through time.

Jesus' heavenly Father is *our* spiritual Parent...is the same I AM that encountered Moses at the burning bush. Just as Jesus is from God, the Creator of the universe, so we are from God. And we too can and will see God when we *stay with* God, chewing the crusty, whole-

grain, sourdough, living bread of God! The living God is even now Creating the world...and us...with a word...with bread that we've already been given. When we're being nourished by living bread—physically and spiritually—when we eat the bread served by I AM...the eternal light and life through the ages...even now when we're surrounded by so much death, we too will have the calm and the confidence to live eternal lives. The living God is creating and nourishing us to live beyond the boundaries of death and into the aliveness of God's light and life. Sustained by living bread, we are free to trust the Spirit of the living God as She draws all of creation into the fullness light and life that, from the beginning, the Creator has been speaking into being.

May it be so.