**John 6:41-51** September 12, 2021

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*John 6:41 The Jews began to grumble about [Jesus] because he said, “I am the bread that came down from heaven.” 42They said, “Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, ‘I came down from heaven’?” 43“Stop grumbling among yourselves,” Jesus answered. 44“No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day. 45It is written in the Prophets: ‘They will all be taught by God.’ Everyone who listens to the Father and learns from him comes to me. 46No one has seen the Father except the one who is from God; only he has seen the Father. 47I tell you the truth, he who believes has everlasting life. 48I am the bread of life. 49Your forefathers ate the manna in the desert, yet they died. 50But here is the bread that comes down from heaven, which a man may eat and not die. 51I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.”*

Dear Friends in Christ,

**What Really Matters about Jesus**

70, 69, 68… You could watch his polling numbers tick down in real time. 67, 66… People ask for his help. They know he *can* help if he wants. But he refuses. 65, 64… They ask, they sweet-talk, finally they stick it to him, but he won’t budge. 63, 62… In fact, he doubles down and starts to say some pretty ridiculous things, things like, ***“I am the bread of life that came down from heaven.”*** 61,60,59…

So passed Jesus’ moment of greatest popularity. His popularity would revive for a moment just before his last Passover and death, but for a variety of reasons, the popularity of Jesus’ last week of life was not like this great Summer of Popularity along the shores of the Sea of Galilee. Great masses were ready to acclaim him king. Thousands surged across the countryside, As Jesus and his disciples got in their boats and hopped from point to point on the coastline, the crowds swished around and along the edges of the Sea of Galilee in pursuit. The crowds couldn’t get enough of Jesus.

In our reading the day after the feeding of the five thousand, the iron was cooling. If Jesus had wanted to strike a blow for freedom, for some sort of God-on-Earth government, the moment of critical mass was passing. The more Jesus spoke, the more his following was falling to pieces.

**I.** You see, there were some things people wanted of Jesus and some things they didn’t. What they objected to in Jesus was gathering around two opposite poles, the north pole of reason and the south pole of desire. Jesus was satisfying neither. And he refused to satisfy either.

On the reason side of things, they objected because what Jesus was saying didn’t make sense. In fact, it was nonsense. ***“I am the bread that came down from heaven.”*** I mean, on how many levels is that just plain weird? “You’re from heaven? Aren’t you ***Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know?”*** Some of them had known him for thirty years. Once he had been a kid down the street, playing in the street with the rest of the kids. Better behaved than the rest, but still a kid. He grew up and learned his father’s trade, carpentry. What could be more earthbound than that? He had to make money to make a living. He got hungry, he got tired. He didn’t exactly get angry, but you could tell that some things displeased him. He was just like everyone else. Soon enough they would find out that he could also bleed and die. ***“How can he now say, ‘I came down from heaven’?”***

Objections to the Christian faith are as old as Christ. No 21st century atheist should smugly imagine that he has some novel insight which the ancient world hadn’t thought of. No unbeliever should think that her microscope can see cracks in the edifice that the unaided first century eye was not keen enough to spot. And no *believer* should think that we live in a time uniquely bedeviled by the skeptic, the unbeliever. As it is, so it has been from moment Jesus turned water to wine. In the summer of Jesus’ popularity ***“[They] began to grumble about him because he said, ‘I am the bread that came down from heaven.’”***

But in a sense, something has changed in the last few decades. The change is not of kind, but merely scale; not something new, just more of it. Once you could only hear the skepticism of as many people as you could personally, physically meet. Now, the many billions who have chosen to be enemies of their Savior each have a way, and an anonymous one at that, to enter your consciousness and bludgeon your beliefs [until your weakened faith finally releases its grasp.] Ignorant or learned, each have an opportunity to repeat in the comments section of any online article the first lie ever heard by human ears, *“Did God really say?”* It’s a lie which was not a lie because there was untruth in it. It was just a question. But it was a lie because it created space for untruth. And so the Father of Lies continues to speak through the lips of his myriad offspring in this world. All of them seek to create doubt in your heart, to challenge the claims of Christ.

There is no one pattern these objections follow. Sometimes they are based on apparent contradictions. “We saw you grow up, Jesus. You can’t possibly be God.” Yes, he is. “You can’t have three persons in one God. That doesn’t make sense.” Well, not to the puny humans intellect it doesn’t. But just because we don’t understand doesn’t mean it’s untrue.

Another sort of objection to the Bible is when there is a perceived unfairness. Like, “How could God says in Colossians 4:1, *‘Masters, provide your slaves with what is right and fair…’*” Isn’t that basically condoning slavery? As if we get to teach God about fairness—we who cheat on our taxes and lie to the police officer.

Others object on the uncertainty principle. “Who has ever been to heaven?” they ask. “Can you prove that God answered your prayer?” “How do you know that the Bible writers weren’t just making it up.”

Rational objections to Jesus take many forms.

In John chapter 6 others objected to Jesus on other grounds. We don’t have time to say too much about them. But these were the ones who actually triggered this event. You see, all these people had gathered around Jesus on this day because the day before he had fed a great crowd with almost nothing in hand. This day they wanted more of the same. They challenged Jesus, that if he really were a prophet, he would do what Moses the prophet had done, namely, he would again miraculously give them bread. They claimed that if Jesus would just give them what they wanted, they would believe in Jesus. It was more a felt-need thing than a rational objection.

What kind of faith is that? It’s a mercenary faith. It’s an “as long as he gives me what I want” faith. It’s people who refuse to honor God because their sister died from cancer, because they have chronic arthritis, because there are starving people in other lands, because… They will always have their proof that God is not generous enough to be worthy of their faith. Jesus would not be held hostage to their demands. Feeding five thousand was the sign, and if the only thing they took away from the miracle is, “This guy can give us free lunch, and he owes it to us,” it would be his last miracle for them.

People will always have their rationale for not coming to Jesus, whether based on reason or personal desires.

**II.** And we Christians fall for it. Sometimes we fall into doubt which is its own danger. But sometimes something else can happen that today’s reading calls to mind.

We sometimes imagine that our mission as Christians is to whack-a-mole. You know that game at the Chuck-E-Cheese arcade where those moles pop up and you try to smack them with a mallet as fast as you can? We get this idea that if we just whack this or that unbelieving lie hard enough, we will convince the unbeliever. Because we love God, we want to defend God’s honor. So it is easy to imagine that our job is to argue against people who have God wrong. But what did Jesus do? Did he whack a mole? Did he directly answer every one of their objections to their satisfaction?

There’s a professor at Martin Luther College. That’s the college where our synod’s teachers and pastors are trained. He tells the story of a classroom exercise he designed. Pairs of students were supposed to imagine talking about their Savior with a skeptic, that is, someone who keeps on raising objections to the Christian faith. One student would be a Christian witness, the other would pretend to be a skeptic. They started playing this game and in short order all the skeptics in the room—who were really Christians just pretending to be skeptics—they were winning all the arguments. Complete novices at being skeptics! The students stopped and were surprised, even unnerved. It is easy to argue like a skeptic. Skeptics imagine that they are cerebral, knowledgeable, smart. Truth is that it is the easiest thing in the world to be a skeptic. Skepticism is our native language.

Which brings up something Jesus said, and which is a good reminder to all who would try to argue people into heaven: ***“No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him.”***

By nature we are skeptics. By nature, we demand that God complies with our standards of reason, that he satisfies enough of our wants, and *then* we will throw in our hat with him. But that isn’t faith. Faith is trusting God even when it doesn’t make sense, even when we don’t get what we want.

The way that faith comes into being is to do what Jesus did in our reading: Not to answer the skeptics point for point, but to speak of God’s extravagant love. So extravagant he was willing to shed blood. His love for us is so extravagant that it is irrational.

In our reading, four different times, Jesus says something so ridiculous that any skeptic would scoff. You would too if anyone in the entire world said these things to you: ***“I am the bread of life.”*** ***“I came down from heaven.” “I will give [my flesh] for the life of the world.” “[Him who believes] I will raise up on the last day.”*** If anyone, well-known or stranger, would say these things to you, you wouldn’t even think about it. You would say, “You’re not the bread of life. You’re a fruitcake!” That’s what is sounded like to Jesus’ audience. How could any of that be true? Jesus didn’t care if it met their criteria for believability. He had to speak the truth.

I think every Christian at some time imagines how great it would have been to live in the time and place of Jesus, to be an eyewitness. But when I read this reading from the Bible, I’m not so sure that would be a good idea. On the one hand I would love to see, to hear, to watch Jesus in action. On the other hand, I can’t help but wonder how skeptical I would have been, watching Jesus, my fellow countryman, who dressed like me, looked like me, spoke like me, who also asked where the restroom is. Would I have believed him? Or would I have sided with those who asked, ***“Isn’t this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know?”*** I don’t wonder. Left to myself I would not have believed. Only God could break through my unbelief.

As our children memorize in the Third Article of the Apostles’ Creed, “I believe that I cannot by my own thinking or choosing believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him. But the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel.” It is not my doing, nor is it even that someone persuaded me, but that the Holy Spirit spoke faith into my heart. Against my sinful nature’s will, I became a believer in Christ, a child of God.

**Conclusion:** Our reading goes to verse 51. Looking ahead to verse 66, we see the epilogue. It tells us what happened after Jesus refused to bow before their rational objections, says, *“From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him.”* 17, 16. *“‘You do not want to leave too, do you?’ Jesus asked the Twelve.”* 15, 14. *Simon Peter answered him, ‘Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.’”* 13, 12. And that’s where it stopped. Not 12%, but the Twelve. They stood there, not because they were so smart, but because as Jesus explained another time, *“Blessed are you… for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven.”*

The Twelve stood around Jesus, the wise teacher, the miracle worker, the food provider, but they called him Son of God, Savior. They knew

**What Really Matters about Jesus**

Thank God that we many millions around the world who gather to worship Jesus know what really matters about Jesus! Amen.