

Hard to Accept

⁶⁰ Then many of his disciples who were listening said, “This saying is hard; who can accept it?” ⁶¹ Since Jesus knew that his disciples were murmuring about this, he said to them, “Does this shock you? ⁶² What if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? ⁶³ It is the spirit that gives life, while the flesh is of no avail. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and life. ⁶⁴ But there are some of you who do not believe.” Jesus knew from the beginning the ones who would not believe and the one who would betray him. ⁶⁵ And he said, “For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by my Father.” ⁶⁶ As a result of this, many (of) his disciples returned to their former way of life and no longer accompanied him. ⁶⁷ Jesus then said to the Twelve, “Do you also want to leave?” ⁶⁸ Simon Peter answered him, “Master, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. ⁶⁹ We have come to believe and are convinced that you are the Holy One of God.” (John 6:60–69)

Context

Over the previous four Sundays, the gospels have covered the “Bread of Life Discourse” from John 6. The Discourse itself reached its completion last Sunday (John 6:51-58). This Sunday we hear the reaction, not from the crowds, but from his disciples. O’Day [609] provides a keen description of how this small passage, in many ways, reflects the entire narrative structure of what came before it:

“John 6:60–71 follows the same pattern as 6:25–59: The disciples protest (6:60; cf. 6:41–42, 52), and Jesus responds. Verses 60–71 can be subdivided into two units: (1) vv. 60–65, which focus on doubt and rejection among Jesus’ disciples, and (2) vv. 66–71, which focus more narrowly on the faith response of the Twelve. The central theme of John 6:60–71 is the range of responses to Jesus among his followers: “grumbling” (v. 61), disbelief (v. 64), rejection (v. 66), confession of faith (vv. 68–69), and betrayal (vv. 64, 71). These verses form a poignant conclusion to chap. 6. In the face of Jesus’ most explicit and far-reaching offer of himself and the gift of life to those who believe, even many among his followers turn away.”

O’Day points out the central theme of vv.60-71 as she discusses the entire narrative structure. Perhaps it also good to consider the unifying theme of the entire discourse before we move to its conclusion.

Most commentators hold that the discourse, begun at the chapter’s beginning verse comes to and end in v.58. But because of the length of “The Bread of Life Discourse,” the complex narrative, and the typical Johannine use of misunderstanding, the whole focus and intent of the discourse can be easily lost. Add to all that differing interpretations of the chapter along sacramental/non-sacramental views, denominational divides, and differences as to degree to which the synoptic gospels’ Eucharistic institution narratives form (or don’t form) the text in John – and the “big picture” can be subsumed in theological debates.

It is critical to remember that this chapter is part of the “Book of Signs” and the narrative begins with the sign of the miraculous feeding of more than 5,000 people. But as with each of the “signs” in John’s gospel, the point is not the sign, but the truth to whom the sign points. In order to fully understand “The Bread of Life Discourse” one begins with the sign (6:1-21) and listens to the discourse and dialogue (6:25-71) so that one can understand the truth signified by the sign. And, I would argue, one would do well to base the interpretive understanding as a continuous reading of a commentary upon the miracle.

The narrative has continuity throughout. The crowds who play such an important role (6:25-34) are the ones who were witnesses to the miracle of the feeding (sign); they are the ones who ate the bread and fish. They are the ones who murmur and grumble (v.41-42) and later quarrel (v.52). They are the ones

who connect the reality of their experience to the reality of the events of Exodus 16 when another “bread” was given to them in their wilderness experience. They are the embodiment of “flesh and spirit.” O’Day [612] rightly points out that “Flesh and spirit belong together, and only when they are held together is life possible. On the one hand, without the Spirit, ‘the flesh is useless’ (6:63), and the miraculous feeding of the five thousand will end the same way the manna miracle ended—with the death of those who ate the bread (6:49, 59a). The miraculous feeding is only that—a miraculous feeding—without the life-giving words of Jesus (6:63, 68).”

It is Jesus’ words in the discourse that are also gift to the crowds along with the bread. The words are the gateway for the ones who ate the bread to see and believe (6:40) and thus to have life and live forever (6:51, 58). At the same time, one must eat the bread in order to live (6:53, 58). These are part of the seamless union of flesh, spirit, humanity, and divinity that are part of the integrity of the whole of Chapter 6.

It seems to me that too many commentators separate the miraculous feeding (vv.1-25) from the Christological and theological content of what follows. Their comparison point is no longer the Johannine miraculous feeding but rather the synoptic Eucharistic institution, norms of the primitive church and later patristic periods, and developing theology of later ages up and through the 17th century.

John’s narrative uses the metaphor of bread to pave the foundation of the whole of the chapter. The phrase “bread from heaven” intentionally points to the events of the Exodus (Ex 16) and the manna – the locus of God’s faithfulness and the people’s grumbling. At the same time it points to the language and image of Isaiah 55, “*why spend your money for what is not bread, your wages on what fails to satisfy?*” There the bread from heaven represents the Word of God that gives and sustains life. Thus in the one metaphor of bread, John draws upon two different gifts from God: the gifts of that which sustains the flesh and that which sustains the Spirit – but not in ways that are apart and separate – but in the wholeness of the human person. There is no gnostic undertone within John that raises the Spirit above the flesh with the end-game of leaving “useless flesh” behind.

Jesus draws upon these metaphors and transforms them in himself as the one to whom the OT metaphors point, as the context in which the fullness of “I am the bread of life” is to be understood. Jesus is the “*living bread come down from heaven,*” the food that gives life – not the manna of the wilderness or the multiplied loaves. It is through eating Jesus’ flesh and drinking his blood that the believer shares in this food. Jesus is the bread that people must eat to have life (6:53-56) and he is also the bread to whom one must listen in order to have life (6:45, 63, 68). It is the same trajectory of Jesus’ offer of new life to Nicodemus and the living water offered to the Samaritan woman at the well. There are many avenues to God, all passing through Jesus.

The institution of the Eucharist is rightly placed and well described by the synoptic gospels, but the Eucharist does not belong solely or uniquely to the death of Jesus (v.51), rather the Johannine Eucharist points to the whole of Jesus’ life and “marks the believer’s full participation in all of Jesus’ life and gifts.” (O’Day, 613). That full participation, body and soul, is the manner in which one “*abides*” in Jesus. One abides in the Word and in the breaching of the bread – and in so doing receives life through Jesus’ abiding presence. There is no divide between faith and action, Word and Eucharist, body and soul. For the Fourth Evangelist, the Eucharist belongs to and is inseparable from the revelation of God in Jesus. “At the heart of both word and sacrament is the urgency for people to see God in Jesus and believe.” (O’Day 614)

Commentary

Challenging the grumbling. ⁶⁰ *Then many of his disciples who were listening said, “This saying is hard; who can accept it?”* ⁶¹ *Since Jesus knew that his disciples were murmuring about this, he said to them, “Does this shock you?”* ⁶² *What if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before?*

Before v.60 the dialogue was with the people in the crowds was marked by grumbling, incredulity, and quarrelling. The same range of reactions will be found among those closest to Jesus, the disciples: murmuring (v. 61), disbelief (v. 64), rejection (v. 66), confession of faith (vv. 68–69), and betrayal (vv. 64, 71). Jesus offers his very self – and yet even among the closest there are those who turn away to a former life, forsaking the very author of life.

John records that even among those who had counted themselves among believers and were following Jesus, even among the disciples, this saying was *skleros*, a word meaning “hard, harsh, difficult.” In this case the three primary meanings perhaps capture the range of reaction among the disciples. Looking ahead to v.66 we see the result: some disciples turn from Jesus and walk away although the “Twelve” remain (vv.67-68). The word *skleros* is related to the word used to describe hardness of heart elsewhere in Scripture. The word used in “murmuring” is the same used of the crowds in vv.41 and 43 – thus connecting the larger discourse to this more private dialogue.

And so Jesus challenges their doubt and their resistance to their understanding of Jesus, the ultimate meaning comprising the sign of miraculous feeding. The challenge is conditional (*what if...*) and is open ended. This is not the first time in John we have seen such language as part of a challenge. Consider John 1:51, “*Amen, amen, I say to you, you will see the sky opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.*” In both this and 6:62, the ascent of the Son of Man becomes the proving ground for the disciples’ faith. In both verses, Jesus moves the disciples’ immediate response, whether faith (1:50) or doubt (6:60), into a broader sphere.

Still, the language, typical of Johannine structure, has several ways to understand the challenge. There are two principle ways: (1) if they saw him ascend, they might be prepared to accept his hard saying – everything might begin to make sense; or (2) if they saw him ascend, their difficulties and incredulity would only increase.

As O’Day [610] points out “Language about the ascent of the Son of Man is synonymous with language about Jesus’ return to God (e.g., 3:13; 20:17) and thus points to the entire Easter event: death, resurrection, and ascension.” Although the language refers to being “lifted up” in John 3:13, the idea of ascension is also carried in the image of Jesus being lifted up on the cross. If the ‘disciples’ who grumbled about Jesus’ hard saying about eating his flesh and drinking his blood should witness his shameful death upon the cross, they would be scandalized still further.

Verse 62 also evokes the preexistence of the Son of Man (cf. 1:1–2, 18; 8:58) and Jesus’ heavenly descent (3:13; 6:38, 51). This verse suggests that the offense of Jesus’ teaching must be contextualized in the sweep of his life, from incarnation to crucifixion and resurrection. The challenge of v.62 is intentionally open-ended, because each person will make his or her own decision about the significance of this pattern of events.

Spirit, Flesh, and Life.

⁶³ *It is the spirit that gives life, while the flesh is of no avail. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and life*

John 6:63 is often a verse that one arguing against any Eucharistic interpretation of the whole of John 6 brings forward. The logic goes like this: “Jesus is saying things that are confusing. His disciples think

he's being literal. Jesus clears it up by saying "No not at all. I'm not saying that you should eat my flesh. My flesh profits nothing! I'm speaking with Spirit and life, which is metaphorical in nature." That is more of a "hand waving" argument, but the scholarly argument proceeds along similar lines. Scholars who don't hold the Bread of Life discourse as Eucharistic present but secondary at best also use the words of v. 63 to buttress their position. How, they argue, could Jesus advocate giving and eating his flesh in vv. 51–58 and reject the value of flesh here? Verses 51–58 thus cannot belong to the core of Jesus' teaching in chap. 6, and the disciples in vv.60–71 can only be understood as protesting Jesus' words in 6:35–50, not those in 6:51–58. (In case you miss the subtle of this train of thought, these scholars are arguing vv.51-58 are not part of the original Discourse but were added in later.)

But that does not make any sense. The flesh (*sarx*) on v.63 only appears in vv.51-58. Why would Jesus correct a misunderstanding about the significance of "flesh" if he had not taught about flesh in the "original text?" I would suggest the "not part of the original Discourse" argument is based on making sure there is no Eucharistic understanding of any part of the discourse. It required later text insertions and modifications of earlier texts. The simpler answer is that the teaching to which many of the disciples take offense (vv. 60–61a), and which Jesus addresses in v. 63, is indeed the teaching about eating Jesus' flesh. And we are still left with understanding "*while the flesh is of no avail.*"

Do v.63 say Jesus' flesh had no value? The whole of the Gospel of John is pretty fleshy – incarnation, life, passion, and death. Surely one is not arguing that these fleshy events have no value. Actually this is exactly what some Gnostics argued – only the spiritual offering was of value. Docetism will take it further and explain that you only see a "ghostly representation" of earthly events. These early and oft repeated heresies are from the earliest days of the church. These heresies considered Jesus' flesh as separated from the divinity and the Holy Spirit, offering that it did not have power or glory different from any other flesh. But all Christians accept that bodily death was real, fleshy, and redemptive – far from "no avail." As many Catholic thinkers from the earliest age have noted if the flesh is united to the Spirit and the divinity, it profits many, because it makes those who receive Jesus' flesh and blood abide in Christ through the Spirit of love (1 John 4:13). [Thomas Aquinas]

Things indeed are confusing for the disciples who have stumbled over his words. But consider that John has already juxtapositions the Spirit and flesh in John 3:6 where Nicodemus is told that he must be born *anōthen* ("again" or "from above") in order to see the Kingdom of God. Now in 6:63 Jesus again brings together the topic of flesh and Spirit in the context of ascending to heaven (v.62). Continuity suggests that Jesus is saying to the disciples that in and of themselves, as people of the flesh, they can never experience eternal life. Only the Spirit (of God) can give life. He then indicated the way the Spirit normally mediates life to people: "*The words* [emphasis added] *I have spoken to you are spirit and life.*" It is because Jesus had been endowed with the Spirit that he could speak the words of God (3:34), and these words mediated eternal life to those who believed (5:24). There is no-one else whose words have this power (v.68). It is worth noting that one cannot believe in Jesus without believing his words. And the problem is not the Word, or the words, but how the hearer perceives Jesus. The disciples certainly see Jesus in the flesh standing before them. But do they see the Word made Flesh (1:14). Verse 63 echoes 1:13 and 3:4–8. A new life born of flesh and spirit is possible to those who believe, but if one limits one's understanding of life to one's preconceptions of what is possible in the flesh, one will receive nothing. Spirit and flesh must be held together; this is the heart of the incarnation.

O'Day [610] also offers that v.63 "counters the notion that the eucharist as a rite in and of itself has almost magical qualities, that the eucharistic elements themselves contain the key to eternal life...John 6:63 affirms that the flesh has salvific power only because it is inseparably bound to the life-giving, Spirit-filled words of Jesus. Jesus is not asking his disciples to eat flesh and drink blood; he is asking them to eat the Spirit-filled flesh and blood of the Son of Man (cf. 6:27)."

Grace and Will

⁶⁴ *But there are some of you who do not believe.*” Jesus knew from the beginning the ones who would not believe and the one who would betray him. ⁶⁵ *And he said, “For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by my Father.”* ⁶⁶ *As a result of this, many (of) his disciples returned to their former way of life and no longer accompanied him.*

Some believe and some don’t. This is a theme woven throughout John 6 – the tension between divine initiative and human choice. Verse 65 echoes vv. 37, 39, and 55 – we are drawn to Jesus via the initiating action of God. As mentioned in a previous commentary, these verses are also something that divides Christian theology. The basic question is the grace that draws one to Christ irresistible? If it is, then why do some disciples walk away (v. 67). If such grace is indeed resistible, then has salvation become a human work relying too much on human free will? Some Christians resolve the question by their theology of “double predestination.” The followers of the Reformer John Calvin, in the generation following Calvin, decided that before people are born their judgment is already given – heaven or damnation – and is apart from any choices they could make in their lifetime: human will and action have no standing. Other Calvinists, principle among them Jacob Arminius, held that God provided “prevenient grace.” It is divine grace that precedes human decision. It exists prior to and without reference to anything humans may have done. As humans are corrupted by the effects of sin, prevenient grace allows persons to engage their God-given free will to choose the salvation offered by God in Jesus Christ or to reject that salvific offer [CCC §2670]. As the Catechism of the Catholic Church [CCC §1742] notes: “The grace of Christ is not in the slightest way a rival of our freedom when this freedom accords with the sense of the true and the good that God has put in the human heart. On the contrary, as Christian experience attests especially in prayer, the more docile we are to the promptings of grace, the more we grow in inner freedom and confidence during trials, such as those we face in the pressures and constraints of the outer world. By the working of grace the Holy Spirit educates us in spiritual freedom in order to make us free collaborators in his work in the Church and in the world.”

And so some disciples, in freedom and apart from the grace of God, walk away; some stay.

Some Believe

⁶⁷ *Jesus then said to the Twelve, “Do you also want to leave?”* ⁶⁸ *Simon Peter answered him, “Master, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.* ⁶⁹ *We have come to believe and are convinced that you are the Holy One of God.”*

The desertion (v. 66) is the catalyst for Jesus’ question to the Twelve: “*Do you also want to leave?*” Again it is an encounter in which divine initiative and human choice again meet. The Twelve must choose whether to accept or reject the offer God has made to them in the person of Jesus.

Simon Peter, given the role of spokesman for the Twelve, chooses to accept what is offered in Jesus. His words in v. 68 acknowledge that he has heard and learned (cf. 6:45) from the bread of life discourse, because he knows that Jesus has “*words of eternal life*” (cf. 6:63; see also 6:40, 47, 51, 54, 58). This has the form of a confession of faith: “*We have come to believe and are convinced...*” “Believe” (*pisteuō*) and “know” (*ginōskō*) function as synonyms here, as they do in many places in the Fourth Gospel (e.g., 10:38; 14:7; 16:30). The use of both verbs intensifies Peter’s confession. Both verbs are also in the perfect tense, indicating now and continuing.

Neal Flanagan [1992] keenly observes: “The chapter concludes (vv. 66–71) with a presentation of two models. Peter is one. He takes the risk, opening himself to the Word whose revealing words give eternal life. “Master, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and are convinced that you are the Holy One of God” (vv. 68–69). The other model is Judas.

He will remain in the group, living a divided existence, but already moving into darkness and into the demonic power which that darkness symbolizes (13:26–30)."

Final Thought

Now that we reached the end of "The Bread of Life Discourse," I thought it appropriate to have a "final thought." I would offer this reflection from Bishop Craig Satterlee, a Lutheran bishop from Michigan [workingpreacher.org]

"Jesus promises rather than instructs or explains. Jesus promises that whoever eats the flesh and drinks the blood of Jesus, the Son of Humanity, has eternal life now and will be raised up on the last day. Jesus promises to provide food for the life of the world, his flesh and blood. Jesus promises to nourish the world with the gift of himself. For the "flesh" and "blood" of Jesus, his incarnate life and very real death on the cross, is life-giving food for us and for the world. In, with, and under the bread and wine of Holy Communion, which is nothing other than Christ's body and blood, Jesus nourishes faith, forgives sin, and empowers us to be witnesses to the Gospel. What would it mean for preachers to proclaim Jesus' promises rather than explain the sacrament?"

"All throughout John 6, Jesus has tried to help us embrace that God's wisdom -- to steal a word from Proverbs -- is not so much knowledge to be explained and understood as it is relationship to be trusted and embraced. Jesus no longer speaks of "belief in," as we find in chapter 3, but of "the one who eats me" (verse 57). For eternal life does not come through understanding correctly or believing the right things. Eternal life is being in close communion with Jesus. Eternal life is to remain in Jesus and to have Jesus remain in us. We take Christ's body and blood into our mouths, into our stomachs, into our bodies, so that Christ remains in us and we remain in Christ. As we eat and drink, Christ moves us closer to himself. Christ moves us closer to the very life of God. Christ moves us closer to himself, so close that we are as intimate with Jesus as the Father is with the Son."

"If in bygone days we leaned too far in the direction of understanding before being invited to eat, perhaps today we lean too far toward eating without proclaiming Jesus' promise and inviting into relationship with him (baptism). There is certainly more going on at Jesus' table and in, with, and under the bread and wine that is Jesus' body and blood than loaves and fishes, manna, and a fellowship meal at which all are welcome. "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day." Jesus promises. "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me" (John 6:54-57). Indeed, as I hear many Sundays, it is Jesus' table. What I hear less frequently is what Jesus promises to do at his. Perhaps proclaiming Jesus' promises will bring our hearers from loaves and fishes to the body and blood of Christ."

NOTES

John 6:60 *many*: Most instances of the word 'disciples' as speaking of the Twelve. There are a number of places where 'disciples' refers to the wider group (4:1; 7:3; 8:31; 9:28; 19:38). It was "many" of this wider group who found Jesus' teaching about eating his flesh and drinking his blood to be a "hard." This group did not include the Twelve, as 6:66–67 makes clear. ***this saying is hard*:** The Greek *skleros* has the meaning "hard, harsh, difficult." It does mean intellectually challenging, but rather it is offensive. It is part of the same word group that appears in the biblical "hard of heart."

[EDNT 3:254] Used elsewhere in OT and NT alike, the connotation is often unbelief. **accept**: The Greek *akouein* means “hear, come to know, obey.” The saying is not hard to understand; it is difficult to accept into the lives.

John 6:61 murmuring: The Greek *gongyzousin* is the same as used in vv.41 and 43. It is used consistently in the LXX to render Hebrew *lûn*. In Exodus 15–17 and Numbers 14–17 this refers to the complaints of the Israelites on their desert wandering. [EDNT 1:256]

John 6:62 Son of Man ascending: The sentence seems unfinished and is a bit obscure. Likely there is a reference to vv.49–51. Jesus claims to be the bread that comes down from heaven (v.50); this claim provokes incredulity (v.60); and so Jesus is pictured as asking what his disciples will say when he goes up to heaven.

John 6:63 Spirit...flesh: probably not a reference to the eucharistic body of Jesus but to the supernatural and the natural, as in John 3:6. *Spirit and life*: all Jesus said about the bread of life is the revelation of the Spirit. **no avail**: *ouk ophelai ouden* – literally, “not of use none.” The middle word carries the meaning “benefit, help or use.”

John 6:67 Twelve: Verse 67 is the first time the expression “the twelve” (οἱ δώδεκα *hoi dōdeka*) occurs in the Fourth Gospel. That expression occurs infrequently in John—only in this passage (vv. 67, 70–71) and in one of the resurrection stories (20:24). The Fourth Evangelist has narrated no call of the Twelve and he introduces the expression with no explanation. It seems likely that he assumes the expression’s familiarity to his readers from other traditions about Jesus. Indeed, the reference to the Twelve and the prominent role of Peter in John 6:66–71 suggest that the Fourth Evangelist draws on traditions similar to those drawn on by the synoptic Gospels. John 6:67–71 is frequently referred to by scholars as the Johannine version of Peter’s confession at Caesarea Philippi (Matt 16:13–20; Mark 8:27–33; cf. the related confession at Luke 9:18–20). The Fourth Evangelist’s use of this tradition here can be compared to his use of Petrine traditions in 1:42–44.

John 6:69 go: The word for “go” used here is that used also of Judas’s going to the chief priests to betray Jesus in Mark 14:10.

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