

Sunday, August 5 and Wednesday, August 8 -- 11th week after Pentecost
John 6:24-35: Full of Surprises

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At the dawn of humanity, life was unpredictable, brutish and short. But as people settled into communities and joined together in groups, routine became the norm and predictability took over. This is why, I think, on the most basic level, human beings do not like surprises, at least on a regular basis.

But because God is doing a new thing in Jesus Christ, Jesus is full of surprises -- and nowhere is this more the case than in John's gospel. His unpredictability upsets the disciples and it startles the crowds. By the time of this reading, people are running on a short fuse. Granted, the feeding of the 5,000 was good surprise—a great show and a free lunch. But it only added to the general confusion of who Jesus was and what he was up to.

In this reading, the crowds who had been sitting peacefully on the grass have just figured out that Jesus has vanished. Some scouts must have been sent out to find out where he has gotten to, and run back to report that the disciples were spotted getting into their boat, but that Jesus was not with them. (We know that Jesus walked on the water to reach their boat when it was about halfway across the Sea of Galilee and had then completed the journey with them.) When the crowds realize Jesus is gone and isn't coming back, they pile into the some nearby boats and head across the Sea of Galilee to find him.

When they do, they're not grateful but confrontational: "When did you get over here?" they demand to know. Jesus turns up the heat and accuses them of being opportunistic: "You're not here because you saw God in my actions, but only because you want another free meal." Then he continues with his teaching: "Don't waste your energy striving for perishable food like that. Work for the food that sticks with you, food that nourishes your life forever, food that the Son of Man provides. This food is guaranteed to last by God the Father."

This seems to get their attention. "Well, what do we have to do to get in on that?" Jesus tells them, "All it takes is to believe in the one whom God has sent. Take a chance. Throw your lot in with him!"

But the people are wary. Apparently they have forgotten all about the miracle that he had just performed. "Why should we? Prove it. Give us a sign. Show us what you can do. After all, Moses fed our ancestors with manna."

"Yes," Jesus says, "but remember, that bread came from my Father in heaven, not from Moses. And the bread I'm talking about is the *true* bread from heaven, the food that brings life to the world and nourishes you for eternal life."

They have no idea what Jesus is talking about, but still this sounds good. "Give us this bread always!" the people beg him. But then he only plunges them back into confusion when he says, "I AM the bread of life."

How are they to believe this? How are *we*?

Let's step back and look at how Jesus is going about this. Notice that Jesus is trying to have a conversation with the people. He is engaging them in dialogue. They are not really getting what he is saying, but they are trying; at least they've made the connection with Moses and the manna. Just as Jesus did in his conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well, he is building a relationship with the people.

This interaction, this engagement, is critical to the life of faith. We need to talk things over together to process them theologically—not just “Can you believe this terrible thing happened?” but “Where was God in the midst of that?” and “What could God be calling us to through it?” This is why small groups—Bible studies, book studies, other forms of more intimate fellowship—are critical to the healthy life of a congregation, just as important as regular worship together.

How are we to believe Jesus and believe *in* him? Perhaps we are so familiar with Jesus' miracles that we take them for granted—“Oh, yes, we all know about that.” But Jesus needs the crowds, and us, to see that, in him, God is doing a new thing. Especially in John's gospel, his miracles are signs pointing toward that. As one writer put it, these signs are not the reason for believing, but the beginning of believing. They require a lot of talking through -- just as his wild claim does, “I AM the bread of life,” which is why most of John's Chapter 6 is devoted to dialogue around it.

Here at the beginning of that discourse, Jesus is offering himself in relationship to the crowd and to us. “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.”

The question is, do we really want that? Isn't it neater and more predictable to just prop up an icon of Jesus' face on our table and pray to him for what we need? But this is not the meaning of salvation, to simply ask for something and get it, or not. That's why Jesus is reminding us today what the Word made flesh is all about--not only about being in relationship with Jesus, but moving into what that actually means.

To do that we must open ourselves to the surprising audaciousness of his words. Consider about the Words of Institution in our communion liturgy, words first spoken by Jesus himself. Do we receive these as truth? "Take and eat – this IS my body. This IS my blood." Jesus' body and blood under the forms of bread and wine. Given FOR YOU. Shed FOR You. Why? For the forgiveness of sin.

Do we receive these gifts into the depth of our being, or have we become dulled to the predictability of the same words every week? One thing that may surprise us is that "you" is not plural—it's individual. This is startling. Given *for me*? Shed *for me*? How can that be? Who am I to receive such a gift, with no obligations attached? I'm not worthy. I'm just occupying a small corner of Planet Earth, trying to get by and barely making it.

But yes, *for you!* And not just for you, but for the forgiveness of all your sins, things you have done and things you have left undone. When we receive the sacrament as truth, it hits us like a lightning bolt: We are loved, worthy, and forgiven. Each of us, equally.

The paradox of our worship life is that, while the patterns of worship are predictable, the content is anything but. When we tune our ears to the truth of Christ, we find that the revolutionary claims of the gospel and the sacraments disrupt our tidy patterns of

existence. They shatter our fortresses of self-reliance. They ask us to believe in irrational promises of love and life and forgiveness and wholeness that come to us as Jesus' body and blood, under the form of bread and wine. All that it takes is to believe.

What does it mean to believe?

To believe is not to *do* anything, but to be open to what God is doing in us and around us.

To believe is to submit everything about us to God's saving work in Jesus Christ.

To believe is to trust that God is doing a new thing in Jesus Christ to restore the wholeness of the universe and all that is in it. We call this new thing the coming of God's kingdom, and it is something that no human agency or power can undermine or negate.

To believe is to acknowledge that everything we have, and everything we are, comes from God, and that God has entrusted it into our care for the sake of the world.

To believe is to fling wide the door of your heart and unbar the gate of your soul so that you are filled and nourished by the true bread from heaven. Be filled with all the fullness of God in Christ, so that your entire life is rooted and grounded in the length, breadth, depth and height of God's love.

Practice this when you come to church. Check your patterns of predictability at the door. When you cross the threshold, open yourself up to the audacious claims of our liturgy, to the wild ride of the gospel, and to the stirring truths of our hymns. Come to the table of mercy. Receive the gifts of bread and wine. Believe, and be fed.

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