

Text: John 6:25-35

**Sermon: CUSP homily for Thanksgiving Day
Service 2019**

This evening we have to consider Jesus' bread of life discourse in John 6. The setting is the feeding of the 5000. This should be familiar to us. After all, Matthew and Luke record the same event. You will remember the sequence of events there: recognition that there is not enough to eat, Jesus' instruction to feed the people anyway, incredulity on the part of the disciples, and the miraculous provision of food, with enough left over. Earlier in John 6, we have John's own version of the event.

But John goes farther. After the people are satisfied, Jesus sets out and crosses to the other side of the sea. He is not there for long, however, before

some who were there at the spectacular feast track him down.

They seem to be sincere in their search, as reflected in their first question, which seems innocent enough. But Jesus is not impressed. Is he suspicious of their motives, or is he deliberately provoking them to lead them deeper into a spiritual discussion?

When I was in seminary, we were taught that the antipathy between Jesus and his opponents reflected the real conflicts between the early Jewish converts and their fellow Jews in John's community. Perhaps. But now that I've been serving in the pastorate and have had a few hard conversations with people, I can appreciate better the value of the well-aimed remark that hits them right where they live. It

seems that only then can the discussion move in a productive direction.

At any rate, the point at issue between Jesus and his opponents concern the loaves. That his opponents ate their fill of them is not the problem. One presumes that there was more than enough for anyone to have seconds or even thirds. After all, they *did* gather and fill twelve baskets with the pieces left over. No doubt the amount of leftovers there will surpass that of even the most extravagant Thanksgiving Day spread this Thursday. No, the problem is that they did not see *through* this abundance to the reality towards which it pointed. Here we have to introduce an important term in John's

Gospel, the term, "sign." Let me make two observations here.

John narrates events in which Jesus displays his divine power. John then frames these events as signs. The function of the sign is to vindicate the claim that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God. This feature of John's gospel makes sense when we realize that its first recipients are Jews. The Jews are looking for signs to test the credibility of this claim. "Jews demand signs, Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified," as the Apostle Paul observed in another context (cf. 1 Cor. 1:22). Even in our lesson they ask Jesus "What sign then will you give that we may see it and believe you? What will you do? (6:30). Of course, the irony here is not missed on the

reader. What else was the miraculous feeding than a sign? Later John says explicitly that Jesus performed *many* signs, and his purpose in writing about these is that you may believe that Jesus is the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name (20:31).

That's the first observation. The second is this: the sign always involves two realities in order to function as such. On the one hand, there is a material reality, and, on the other, an immaterial or spiritual reality. Jesus uses material realities to point to spiritual realities. For example, bread is the source of life; it sustains us and renews our strength. But this is precisely why it is such an apt vehicle to convey the deeper spiritual reality which Jesus himself is. By

means of the bread, Jesus points to himself: *I* am the source of life; I sustain and renew the one who believes in me. And I am an unending supply of bread, so that the one who comes to me will never be hungry and the one who believes in me will never be thirsty.

Of course, the language here will only serve to confuse and anger his opponents, as we see later in John 6. But perhaps we Christians should not be so harsh with them. After all, Jesus' words here and elsewhere about bread occasioned bitter disputes in our own churches over the Lord's Supper or Eucharist. In fact, these disputes served to drive a deep wedge between the two major traditions represented here tonight: Catholic and Protestant, with

disastrous consequences for the unity of the church in the West. How do we understand the relationship between the sign (the bread and the wine) and that of which it is the sign (the body and blood of Christ) in the Lord's Supper?

Obviously, we cannot answer this question definitively tonight. We can only note that significant progress has been made between Reformed and Catholic Christians toward a shared understanding of the sacraments of baptism and the Eucharist, especially during the last fifty years. In 2010, for the seventh round in the dialogue between United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and four Reformed denominations, including the Christian Reformed Church in North America and Reformed Church in

America, culminated in the landmark report "This Bread of Life." We at CUSP encourage your congregations to make this report the subject of study groups or Sunday school classes, if you haven't already.

For now, let it suffice for us to say this: While the sign and the signified are to be distinguished, they are not to be separated. The body of Jesus is not incidental to that which comes down from heaven to give life to the world. The bread of the Eucharist is not incidental to the gospel promises that it communicates and confirms. The tendency to separate them is perhaps a danger to which Zwinglianism has exposed us, especially in the

Reformed churches. But we need to hold them together not only because we affirm the Lord's Supper as a sacrament, but also and above all because we believe in a Creator who cares about the material, about the physical.

Moreover, John affirms in the first chapter of his gospel that Jesus is the Word of God made flesh. In the physical body of this man, God himself made his dwelling place among us.

Since this is the case, then God is certainly concerned with our lives, in this material world, in the here and now. The spiritual and the material are not opposed here. Rather the former is in the process of transforming the latter. This is what the Reformed call

sanctification. And sanctification culminates in glorification, when we shall be made like Jesus when he appears, and see him as he is.

In the meanwhile, Jesus, the Bread of Life, is our continuing nourishment for the lives we lead today, in our bodies, in the here and now, as we continue on our pilgrim's journey to the there and then. He is bread enough for this journey.

In this connection, I am reminded of a case study I read for a seminary course in pastoral care and counseling. An engaged couple went to a pastor to plan their wedding service. Dan was an easy-going man whose image of marriage revolved around having a

companion to go on camping trips with him. He loved to camp and fish and hunt and hoped that his fiancé Carmen would go too. It was clear that Dan enjoyed her company, even if she didn't really care much for these activities. In fact, Carmen had never been camping before, but was willing to give it a try to please Dan, whom she loved very much. Because Carmen was fearful of the future and both were quite shy, the conversations with the pastor took time to unfold. Carmen's family background was littered with abandonment and divorce. She worried all the time that she would run out of love. She was fearful of having children with

Dan because she felt she did not have enough love.

The pastor at one point asked her if she had a favorite Bible passage. She could only remember the one about Jesus feeding the 5000 and having leftovers. She herself had little experience of having "leftovers." In planning the wedding, the pastor wisely suggested that they make the account of the feeding of the five thousand the focal point of their readings and prayers. Although she remained fearful, Carmen was able to entertain the hope that she would have bread enough for the journey through life with Dan, with enough left over.

Jesus tells his opponents: work for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. It is inexhaustible. You will never be hungry or thirsty again.

Carmen's story calls to mind a worship service that a friend helped to plan. The theme was God's abundance. It was communion Sunday, and they had arranged the liturgical furnishings, together with the bread and the wine on the table, to convey this theme of divine abundance. Now historically the Reformed were resolutely opposed to the use of images in worship, since it constitutes a violation of the second commandment. But this commandment does not apply to the bread and

cup of the Lord's Supper, which the Reformers, following Augustine, were fond of calling "visible words."

At any rate, the planning achieved its intended effect. After the service, a young woman came up to my friend with tears in her eyes, thanking him for his part in the service. He acknowledged her gratitude and asked her why the tears. She replied: "I just never thought of God's grace that way before—abundant, overflowing." My friend then said: "But you've grown up in the church; you've heard hundreds of sermons; you've witnessed baptisms; you've participated in the Lord's Supper. How is God's grace good news to you now?" "I have heard it

before, but I have never made the connection between grace and God's generous provision of bread and wine before."

Grace is gift. Grace, especially God's grace, is generous, abundant, and overflowing gift. How are we to respond to such a gift? We express our gratitude to the giver. Gratitude wells up within us when we see and receive the gift. It is implied in the very word Eucharist, which comes from the Greek word for thanksgiving.

Back to Carmen. Carmen's fearfulness was diminished somewhat by the good news according to John—that through Jesus Christ God gives to us life that is full, abundant and

overflowing. It was her response of faith that diminished her fear.

New Testament scholars claim that the contents of the gospel of John serve to make an appeal, and therefore constitute an invitation to respond in faith. It is clear that John—and most of the Bible—is meant not only to inform, but also to convince, persuade, reinforce convictions, and to motivate to action. We already noted the purpose for which John writes his gospel: "I write so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and through believing may have life in his name" (20:31). "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent" (6:29).

Thus, we may say that John's aim is less to inform than to transform his reader. But what is it to believe?

John certainly teaches that it involves assent to a claim. Accept who this one claims to be—this is the burden of John's gospel. But faith for John and for the biblical authors generally is more than notional assent. It is also active trust. Faith is only faith when it is lived in dialogue with our own lives and relates to all our thinking, planning and doing. It can only emerge and grow when it confronts all the fears and aspirations, successes and failures, hopes and disappointments of our lives.

German Lutheran pastor and theologian Helmut Thielicke distinguished himself during the era of reconstruction following the Second World War. When asked once how to define faith, he said: "faith is the 'nevertheless' that the one who believes puts to life." Carmen did not have enough love to give, "nevertheless" she committed herself to Dan in marriage. This unemployed man's prospects may not be good, "nevertheless" he ventures out. That employee may be thrown under the bus, because she called her boss out on fraudulent practices, "nevertheless" she chose to stand up to him. That Christian young person may be rejected by her friends because she did not succumb to peer

pressure, “nevertheless” she chooses non-conformity. “Nevertheless...” and you can fill in the blank for yourself.

The basis for this active trust of course is God’s trustworthiness. God provides. We do not secure for ourselves what we need for this life and the next out of our own resources. Rather, we have Jesus, God’s provision. He is the Bread of Life, the one who nourishes, renews and sustains us unto eternal life, which we receive through believing. For him and through him our thanksgiving overflows to our God. Amen.