

The New Original Wonder Bread

Sunday, August 9, 2015; John 6:35, 41-51

Ken McGarry

I read the news today, oh boy. It was filled with stories of strife and struggles, suffering and sadness. It was also filled with tales of people doing good, being generous, and bringing beauty to the world. And, of course, there were stories about deflated footballs. Again. It seems that even in the news, there's nothing really new. The tales that have been told since the dawn of time are told and retold. As the writer of Ecclesiastes tells us: "What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun" (Ecc. 1:9).

In today's reading from the Gospel of John, we heard about some old old news, some new old news, and the potential for some new new news. In the gospel, we are reminded that God provided manna for the children of Israel as they wandered in the desert, and that just as God had sustained the people as they wandered in a dry, lifeless land, God provides spiritual life through Jesus. God provided the original wonder bread, and God provides a new wonder bread.

Throughout the Gospel of John, the author works to demonstrate that while the story of Jesus may be new, it is also old and original. It seems that the Gospel was written by and for a community of Jesus-following Jews that had been expelled from a synagogue for their beliefs. So even though John was written by a Jewish person (or persons) to Jewish people, throughout its pages "the Jews" get a bad rap. John was not referring to all Jewish people when writing of "the Jews," but rather the synagogue authorities who cast out his community. Throughout the book, he writes to convince the reader that believing in Jesus as the Messiah is not against Judaism, but is a new, original expression of it.

Far from being anti-Jewish, John's argument fits within the traditions of Judaism of the first century CE. At that time, there were at least 16 other sects within Judaism in addition to what became known as Christianity. There were Pharisees, Saducees, Essenes, Zealots, and a host of others, all of whom viewed their traditions as purer expressions of Judaism than the other guys'. The disagreement at times led to conflict and, as in the case of John's community, division and separation. Second century Rabbi Ben Torta stated that God allowed the temple in Jerusalem to be destroyed in 70 CE because hatred lived within its walls. We also see disagreement and conflict within the movement of Jesus-following Jews as chronicled in our New Testament: Read Paul as he writes about Jewish Christian teachers who told their gentile male converts to be circumcised that he, St. Paul, wishes would castrate themselves instead—yikes!—or the Letter of James as it discussed a “pure religion” of people doing good works as defined in the Hebrew Scriptures, seemingly in defiance of the more widely-spread type of Christianity of grace and freedom from the Torah's instruction such as the Christianity of Paul and his followers. And so John writes within this tradition of competing traditions to convince his readers/hearers that his way is the best way.

John does this by showing that Jesus offers a direct connection to God, unmediated by the traditions of Judaism that had developed over many centuries. In John 1:1 we read that “In the beginning,” before the traditions of Judaism, including the writing of Genesis, arose, “was the Word,” Jesus, the living Light of the World that overcame and overcomes chaos and darkness. Another example of this can be seen in John 8:58 where Jesus states, “Before Abraham was, I AM,” thus claiming to be connected to God without the mediation father Abraham and the patriarchs. In chapter 10, Jesus states that he is the Good Shepherd as well as the Gate for the sheep. And in the passage that we heard this morning from chapter 6, Jesus is the bread that does not spoil after a day, but gives life

day after day, indeed for all eternity. In all of these examples, John portrays Jesus as the new original, offering a pure, authentic, unmediated connection between God and people that would sustain them and give them guidance and a sense of purpose and ultimate meaning. While I don't believe at all that the various traditions of Judaism are now superceded by the traditions of Christianity, a viewpoint that has, sadly, been held by many over the centuries and that has caused much violence, I do follow in the tradition of John in finding that abundant life comes to people through Christ and his way.

Jesus, the Bread of Heaven, demonstrated the nature of this abundant life in his teachings and actions, even as he was nailed to the cross. Being filled with and sustained by God's life did not remove the reality of death for him, and it does not for us. It does not prevent a person from becoming ill or suffering loss. It does provide spiritual strength and peace in the midst of great trials. It was this God-given sustenance that enabled Jesus to forgive those who put him on the cross, even as he suffered there. And the eternal bread of heaven dwelling within you can enable you to find such inner strength and goodness even when life's journey takes you to deep, dark valleys or desolate, dry places.

We remember and celebrate this new original wonder bread whenever we gather together at this table. The sacrament reminds us that Christ lived and died for us and that Christ is with us, filling us with abundant life, which nourishes and sustains our spirits and enables us to thrive and grow. The sacrament reminds us that this enriching gift of God comes when we gather, fills us all, and unites us as one spiritual family. It reminds us that God feeds people, and that we, as God's children, should feed people. And it reminds us that as God offers us reconciliation and peace through this gift, we must be people who offer peace and reconciliation to others. Can we do something new under the sun by being such goodness-filled and goodness-giving people? Can we find new bonds of

fellowship with our Jewish brothers and sisters? Or with any others without claiming to have a superior tradition? That kind of life-giving bread would be truly wonderful to offer a world very much in need of it. May we be fed by God through Christ and be dedicated to offering God's love and peace to all people God places in our lives this day. Amen.