

John 6:22–35

James Nestingen · CROSS Talk

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It appears from our texts for this Sunday after Pentecost that not even the good Lord can open a cafeteria without complaint.

The psalm gives us one of the great passages, along with a couple of others, assuring us of God's continuing commitment to keep us all fed: "You open your hand, satisfying the desire of every living thing." These are beautiful verses, and well known in places where people find the next meal a challenge. And following on this great promise we have two wonderful feeding stories. We have the story of the quail and the manna from Exodus 16. Typically, once God gets his largesse engaged he can't turn it off again, and so you can imagine: it's raining food. There are quail, and there's manna all over the ground, and the Israelites look at it suspiciously and then put a little on their tongues. "Hey, this is good."

The quail, of course, are not so subtle. It happens that on our property here in Oregon we have quail, more quail than you can imagine. I hunt those quail with my dear old dog, Sigrid, named after Harrisville's mother. Sig and I go out in the back and hunt quail, and one time we got into a whole covey, and the quail started flying every which way, including at me. It was more fun than a barrel of monkeys. You know how quail are. They're so blamed cute, with their little topknots, walking along so nicely. And of course when they take off they just go crazy. Here the Israelites could catch them. They didn't need a little twenty-eight-gauge shotgun made in Italy. The person who carries the double-barreled twenty-eight gauge and shoots people rather than quail shall remain nameless. Anyway, they don't need any twenty-eight. They go out and pick up these quail, and you never had a better lunch in your whole life. So the good Lord feeds the Israelites as they are on their way out of bondage in Egypt.

Then, in a wonderful echo of this feeding, we get the second great biblical feeding: the feeding of the five thousand, now in John's Gospel. Previously we heard it from Mark, and now we're getting the follow-up. Having had such a magnificent lunch, some loaves and fish and enough for everybody, with twelve baskets left over, the people who ate are looking all over the place for Jesus, because they figure he should open a stand and keep this little miracle unfolding day

after day, so they can stuff their bellies and live happily ever after. So: same story, second verse. God is cosmically generous: food all over the ground and quail flying everywhere, and now loaves and fishes for five thousand people. You couldn't ask for anything better than that. This is grace itself.

But, as my grandma used to say, some people would complain if they were hung with new rope. She also told a terribly sardonic story about a man who was going to be hanged. He said, "I don't know what the hurry is. They can't do anything until I get there anyway." Pretty bad. So we'd think we have happy people everywhere. Instead, of course, they're lined up at the complaint bureau, bitterly taking on Moses and Aaron, and probably Miriam as well. I bet she got it in the ear too, though she doesn't appear much in this text. According to at least one account, she has been cleansed out of it by some nasty male imperialist who didn't like Miriam taking such a big role in the story. I really think Miriam is great; she's a wonderful poet.

Anyway, they're all complaining. And now, after the feeding of the five thousand, the crowd has elected a committee and is pursuing Jesus, because of course they want to institutionalize this feeding: turn it into food for everyone, start a world hunger program where they can use the funds for other purposes as well, and set a precedent for a nameless organization we like to dislike but will not mention here. So we've got complaints galore from the Israelites, and now the five thousand seeking to institutionalize Jesus' feeding program. They look all over for him and can't find him, and when they finally do, they get the conversation of a lifetime: promise upon promise upon promise.

In such a context the text from Ephesians comes across with such delight. I just love the letter to the Ephesians. Paul, or one of his A-plus students, is pouring out this wonderful stuff. It's just fabulous. Of course the Holy Spirit has something to do with it too, and we give thanks to God for that. So we'll take a nice interlude with this text from Ephesians 4, which is a lot of fun, and then we'll go hustling right back to the Gospel, because here is the bread of life passage: "I am the bread of life." How do you like that? That's just about as good as it gets.

The Psalm and Exodus 16: Enough for All

So, our usual procedure: the supporting texts first, though we won't stay very long with the psalm today, and then off to the Gospel. I think the reason the psalm is associated with Exodus 16 and John 6 is the passage some of us learned as a table prayer: "You open your hand, satisfying the desire of every living thing." That's a beautiful promise. There's a similar

promise in another psalm or two. These passages promise that none of God's people will ever starve. God has food for everyone. It's typically an expansive promise; it applies to all.

And as such it spurs a very interesting reaction. When you get a universal promise like this, the quickest way to falsify it is to find one among all who hasn't got enough. So very quickly an objection forms: What is God doing making a promise like this? He doesn't keep it. But before jumping to such a conclusion so quickly, it would be good if every one of us could go to an African village where there are regular food shortages. Tom Olson has already done this, of course. When you do, you'll discover that this passage has a different trajectory. It works differently among the poor than it does among those of us who have to go to TOPS or Weight Watchers or whatever. It works better, because the promise stands plain and simple. God promises that he will provide food for all, and in general that's exactly what happens.

If you ask Luther how God can say this, Luther will say, "Of course there's enough food for everyone." There is no food shortage in the classical sense; there are problems of distribution. Now it's starting to get pretty close to home, because we pile up food to support prices and make sure we get enough, and leave lots of people all over the world hungry. There you go; now we're running into the problem. But the passage, as a promise, is just that, and in fact God keeps this promise. Even in a drought like the one that has developed this summer, he makes sure we all get something to eat.

I always think it's kind of funny. People run against these programs and talk about wasting money, wasting money, and then when they're hungry it's a different story. Run against welfare, and then have your parents sell everything they have so they can qualify for free care in the nursing home. How's that? That's kind of crazy. But here we go: there is enough. And because there is enough, God is keeping his word, and we can see him doing exactly that: feeding the Israelites in the middle of the desert, where they have nothing, and at the same time feeding the five thousand. He is generous even with people whose classic inclination is to gripe.

One of my grandpa's favorite stories was about a farmer who got a bumper crop, a hundred and twenty bushels of wheat to the acre. The pastor went out to call on him and said, "Well, Ole, there's nothing to complain about this year, is there?" And Ole said, "Well, but just think how hard it is on the soil." One way or another we'll find a way to complain, and one way or another the good Lord will find a way to be generous. So, having brought the people out of Egypt, even as they're lined up at the complaint bureau bringing their charges against Moses

and Aaron and Miriam too, probably the whole family, he provides more than enough for the day. “Give us this day our daily bread.” God answers the Israelites with manna and quail, answers the five thousand out in the desert with loaves and fishes, and answers us with food aplenty, so that we have enough left over to share, which is the purpose of the abundance: that other people may eat as well. So we’ve got the psalm and Exodus, the story of the quail and the manna, working together hand in glove and setting us up to move into the Gospel.

Ephesians 4: One Body

With those few comments on those two texts, we should spend a little more time with this wonderful letter to the Ephesians. I don’t know about you, but I’ve really been enjoying reading and working with these lessons from Ephesians. They’re so refreshing. And here we get the full course of Paul’s appeal: many gifts, the same Spirit, one of the classic passages in the whole book, Ephesians 4:1–16.

Interestingly, this passage opens with an appeal. “I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called.” He is appealing to them. Technically this passage belongs to a group of passages in Paul’s letters called paraenesis. They are appeals. Paul is making an appeal to his congregation, and they sound for all the world as if he were appealing to the willpower of the Ephesians, asking them to cooperate more fully with the power he is describing. Better be careful here.

In fact these paraenetic passages, as they’re called, work in quite a different way. Instead of appealing to willpower or to the self as an agent, they concretize and express a little piece of the gospel. They give a concrete indication of how the gospel works in the particular circumstances of life. So they are not so much an appeal addressed to you to provide what is being asked for as they are a prayer, and as a prayer they concretize what the Holy Spirit is working and doing in you. So in verses 4 and following the apostle Paul speaks very concretely and specifically of the shape of the congregation: “one body and one Spirit, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all.” The work he appeals for is by no means the work of the parishioners in Ephesus, but the work of the Holy Spirit among the parishioners in Ephesus, that they may all be brought into the body of the community.

Paul deliberately uses the word “body,” of course, because he is writing to people touched by the body-soul dualism of the Greco-Roman world. They’re not necessarily Gnostics, though a lot of them are, but they are suspicious of the body. What is truly spiritual is uplifted and

great. The body stinks under its arms and messes its pants. It wakes up snoring and drooling, and it has all these erotic movements. According to the Ephesians, the body isn't much. The spirit, that's another matter. But Paul is a good, earthy believer. He loves the body, and he loves the goodness of God expressed in the body. So when he speaks of the body of Christ, he's not just describing a metaphor. He's describing a very concrete, down-to-earth, specific community meeting in a room on a corner in Ephesus.

Some years ago my dear wife Carolyn and I made a tour of Turkey and got to see Ephesus. We went to the remains of the great library, and there was a brothel right across the street from it, with two signs together, one pointing to the library and the other to the brothel. Apparently those guys didn't study all the time. But this is what happens when you despise the body: then it's all right to indulge it. So you get a contempt for the body that is the reverse side of the coin from license. Both are wrong. Contempt for the body and indulgence of the body, the mere pursuit of the body, are both problematic. The body is God's creation. It is the goodness of earthly life. And this goodness of the body expresses itself in the body of Christ: Christians in their bodies, in their bodily communities, continue to incarnate the good news of the gospel. So the bodily expression is fundamental, and Paul sets out a wonderful tribute to the unity of the Christian church in these terms, verses 4 and following: one Lord, one Spirit, one body. All these things are gifts of the Spirit.

The spiritual realm is not an intellectually abstract realm in which we talk to one another in unintelligible languages. The spiritual realm is the earthly realm. We have a wonderful old couple in this congregation whom Carolyn and I just love. They've been married sixty-five years, and they come to church holding hands. They're inseparable. Those two testify in their bodies to the continuing goodness of God in the life of the community. That's how it works. They embody the love of God among us.

A Unity God Gives

And this oneness is eschatological. What happened in the ELCA, of course, is that an attempt was made to make politics out of the oneness of the church. One party thought they were the true ecumenists, and the rest of us were outdated old-school types, giving evidence of origins in North Dakota and other backward places where people still speak with accents, thank goodness. These self-transcendent types were going to create the unity of the church. It's as though in John 17, when Jesus prays for the unity of the church, he were praying to the church rather than to God. He's praying to God, and all of a sudden the bishop interrupts and

says, “I can take care of that. I’ll do that.” Ridiculous. The unity of the church is not something the church creates. When the church tries to create it, it just destroys unity.

It’s like that great joke about good news and bad news for the pope. The good news is that the church will be one. The bad news is that the phone call announcing it is coming from Salt Lake City. That’s how politics works: somebody thinks he represents the unity of the church, and so he splits off from everybody else. That’s just bogus. This unity is God-given. It’s not something we achieve. It’s not something we post on a Red Feather chart: “We’re getting closer and closer to unity now.” Rather, it’s a gift of God. And so the church is one. You find that it’s already one, and you start experiencing its oneness, and it’s just fabulous.

One of the great thrills of the past year was hearing the absolution from an Ethiopian pastor. Can you imagine? All the way across the world, to stand beside a great man nearly a hundred years old, one of the first converts to the Lutheran church in Ethiopia. You see the oneness of the church embodied beside you. It’s not something we do or achieve.

And because it is an eschatological unity, each of us has a particular gift of the Holy Spirit, given for the unity of the body. This is Paul’s coinage; he’s the one who developed the term “charismatic gifts.” *Charis*, grace: “The free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” And the *charis* of God’s grace embodies itself in us in particular gifts. We’re good at different things. Some of us are good with money, some with administration, some with prophecy, some with our tongues, with ecstatic languages, and some of us are good in all kinds of concrete, dimensional ways. These are all gifts of the Holy Spirit, charismatic gifts if you will, given for the sake of the church. So we are one body under one Spirit, embodied in the community of the church.

We’re looking forward to the day when all barriers drop and this oneness expresses itself fully. But that will be an eschatological day, a day at the end time, and, as the book of Revelation tells us, there will be no more church and no more pastors, because they’ve got to get rid of us for the true unity of the church to express itself. Right now we’re part of the problem, not the solution. Lots of fun. When he was dying, Forde always said that if he woke up at a church service, he’d know he had been condemned. Worse yet: what if you died and woke up at an annual meeting? You’d start looking for the heat right away, or for the air conditioning, whichever.

John 6: The Elusive Christ

Anyway, that's the situation in this beautiful text from Ephesians. Now we'll hustle on to the Gospel, John 6:22–35, and take several minutes to work through it.

The first four verses deal with Jesus' elusiveness. This is a lot of fun. "The next day the crowd that had stayed on the other side of the sea saw that there had been only one boat there." They are trying to figure out where Jesus is, and there was only one boat. Then they finally find him on the other side of the lake, and when they find him over there they wonder how in the world he got there. We know he walked, but they didn't have a clue. And they're a little ticked off. You can hear a little edge in their pursuit of Jesus.

One thing we know dead certain about him is that he is elusive, a little bit reclusive. He is God incarnate, of course, expressing God among us in the flesh. But because he is human, according to the rules, he gets tired and worn out, and maybe he even gets a little hostile when he's looking for a place to get away. We see this again and again. He has fed five thousand people, he's worn out, they're bearing down on him, and he just disappears. Maybe that's why he walked on water: he figured it was the only way he could get away from that blamed crowd.

But now the crowd is irritated. They've eaten the loaves and loved it, and they figure Jesus should make a habit of this. If the Savior of the world wants to open a cafeteria and keep us all fed, so much the better. They're not going to leave it as an option; they're insisting on it. So when they find him they're a little irritated, and Jesus responds, "You are looking for me because you ate your fill of the loaves." And of course that's exactly the truth.

So we have to say this about Jesus: when you look for him, you don't always find him. He's not always right there close at hand. Sometimes he is so close that it's overpowering. But sometimes part of the experience of faith is that he appears to be going the other way, as in the text for this past Sunday. He's detached, distant. We don't see him. He's elusive, and we can't catch hold of him for one reason or another. And when he starts this conversation with the crowd that has followed him, the elusiveness remains. Remember that great passage in the second chapter of John's Gospel, where Jesus would not entrust himself to the crowd, and John explains that he knew what was in everyone, and needed no one to tell him what was in the human heart. Looking for loaves, you bet, and whatever else we can get our hands on. So he withdraws. He doesn't come right out in the open where people can grab him.

But we also know this about him: as elusive as he may be, he will never break a promise, not under any circumstances. And we'll see it now. They're fencing, he and the crowd, jostling one another back and forth, with a little irritation on both sides. But even so, he's going to go to the promise and just hand it over. So let's take a look at the conversation.

Two Kinds of Bread

The term "bread" is being used in a couple of different senses. This is part of the fun of reading John's Gospel. Rudolf Bultmann, who wrote one of the allegedly greatest commentaries on John, figured the book had been scrambled and reorganized it so it would make a little more sense. That's boring. It's too bad, really. Maybe it was scrambled, but part of the fun of John's Gospel is that people ask questions and Jesus answers at an entirely different level. You know the conversation with Nicodemus, for example. Carolyn and I read Scripture aloud to one another at breakfast as part of our devotions, and I remember the last time we read the ninth chapter of John, where the man born blind is: we were both laughing out loud, because nobody got it. That's just the way it is in John's Gospel: sometimes the conversations are a little askew.

So "bread" is used here in a couple of ways. One is the bread you bake and eat. I hope you don't buy that air-and-marshmallow bread at the store, that sweetheart bread. It's just one step away from marshmallows. It's terrible, full of chemicals, no good for you. But if you bake bread and have real bread, that's really nourishing. Even on this blessed diet, which I hate, I've made a deal with the supervisor of the diet, who is not my wife, thank goodness, but somebody outside: I can bake all the bread I want; I just can't eat all the bread I want. Then you get real bread, chewy and flavorful. I've got one of my granddad's recipes for rye bread, limpa rye, full of good things; it tastes a little of licorice. That's really fun. Not too much sugar, but it's still good.

So there's bread for the body, and on the other hand there's the bread of the Spirit, the bread of God's investment and love for us, "the bread that comes down from heaven," as Jesus calls it, the bread we eat to eternal life. And this bread is not "spiritual" bread; we don't want to use that term. In a sense it's bodily bread, but it's richer. If the marshmallow bread builds strong bodies eight ways, this bread makes a whole person. This bread shapes life, the new life, and sustains you in all the conflicts and all the emptiness and all the troubles of life. This is the bread that comes down from above, that comes down in God's Word and fills us full.

So Jesus says, “Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life.” The food that perishes is a kind of ironic description of our daily pursuits, which are full of concern for the bread that perishes: not only the bread we stick in our mouths and eat, but the bread that sustains us in our bodily relations. Think of how we take life out of the earth and out of the animals. I don’t want to get into it now over hunting; there are few enough legitimate pleasures left. But I always tell those who are critical of hunting that they should think about the violence done to a carrot. Here’s the poor carrot, with thirty-two white horses chomping down on it and grinding it. How violent! Well, that’s how we are. We take life out of the earth, and we take life out of the animals.

For us North Dakota types, prairie people, duck hunting is not merely a sport; it’s a religion. I have many happy memories. I remember one time up north of Rugby with a couple of old Norwegians, hunting white geese, whites and blues. We met at the restaurant and drank coffee for a couple of hours, then went out just before dawn. It was fall just turning into winter cold. We lay by a ditch near a lake, and the geese came up off the lake in hordes, and we shot and shot, and we came home with all these white geese. The way you clean a white goose is to put your thumbs on the breast and just open it. They’re like a kite, a light little bird, and what you want is the medallions, the breasts. So you pull them open with your thumbs, extract the medallions, the breast meat, and cook it in a stew. It’s a graphic expression of how we extract life from other things, from things that are perishing generally, things that are vulnerable.

We’re watching harvest out here now. We have these beautiful days in late July and August, and the winter wheat is coming in. It’s just gorgeous. The wheat has grown to full height and stands waiting, and the combine comes and gobbles it up, and the kernels go up into the hopper, and then they’ll be ground, more violence done, until finally the food that perishes is fit to consume. It goes through the belly and out the back, and it’s done. It perishes. That’s how it is. We are inevitably intertwined in the world of death, preoccupied with food that perishes: freezers and canners and ovens and dryers and mills and grinders of every kind. The apparatus of our life is extractive. We take life out. We take life from the animals and from the earth, we crush it and grind it and make it useful to ourselves, and then we get rid of it and go on to what’s next.

I Am the Bread of Life

But Jesus gives life. That's the difference. The food that perishes is vulnerable to all kinds of molds and everything else attacking it, until we can get it and grind it up and use it ourselves. But Jesus gives life, and he gives life by laying down his life. He gives life to us. He doesn't take it from somebody or something else. He doesn't need to grab a beautiful white goose that grew up in the Arctic and is flying down to Texas for the winter, or one that has spent the winter in Texas and is wistfully flying north, dreaming of the Arctic again. He doesn't need to pull a white goose open and take out the breast meat to make himself some stew. He has life in himself, and he bestows life. He lays down his life. He gives his life. And this is the food; this is the life that is eternal life.

So the crowd asks, "What must we do to perform the works of God?" How do we work for that bread? Do they sell it five loaves for a buck, or three and a half dollars a loaf? How do you earn it? Well, there's only one way: you don't. It's given to you. When Jesus uses the term "work" for eternal life, he says it is given. Of course it is given, and because it's given, this life sustains us. Even when you're hungry, that bread is there. Even when you're dying, that life is there. Even when you're famished, you're full of this bread. Even when you're dead and have no potential whatsoever, even when you've lost all things, nevertheless this life flows into you in the form of the resurrection, so that you are raised to newness of life.

And now Jesus identifies himself. He is this bread. How do you like that? At the end of the text he says it: "I am the bread of life." Think of that. You know Scripture well enough to know that whenever you hear the words "I am," you have to be careful, because that, of course, is God's name. We say "he was," or "I hope I will be." God says, "I am." And when Jesus says, "I am the bread of life," he is saying he is the one true and only bread. Every other bread you eat is just a prelude to hunger.

Even my beautiful sweet rolls, which I bake for my lovely grandchildren and sugar up over the objections of their parents, so I can charge them up and watch them run. It's just fabulous. Even my beloved sweet rolls: you finish one and you want another. That's the bread that perishes. Pretty soon you've eaten two and you're thinking maybe you can have a third. It doesn't last, and because of all that sugar it's got about ten minutes' worth of energy, and then you're flat hungry all over again, cruising the kitchen looking for something else. Do you recognize this person? I've never seen a person like that in our house. But that's the food that perishes. You eat it, and you're hungry.

But the one true and only bread, the bread that comes down from heaven, is all the energy and all the force and all the gift and all the grace invested in Christ Jesus. When that bread fills your belly, it fills you; it takes over your heart. And when it takes over your heart, you live in alignment with the one true and only God, who created heaven and earth, who redeemed us in Christ Jesus, who sent his Spirit to express his gifts in our bodies. Can you imagine? This is the bread that comes down from above.

Of course Jesus knows we are going to have to work for the bread that perishes. That's part of it. If you don't work for the bread that perishes, nobody is going to feed you; you have to find it. But the bread that perishes is not ultimate. It's not the final bread. The final bread, the bread that really feeds us, is God's Word: God in Christ filling us with his Spirit and making us useful by investing gifts in us. Now that's life-sustaining. You eat bread, even the best bread, fresh from the oven with butter running over it, and it's so good you can only give thanks. But the bread that really satisfies is the bread in Christ Jesus.

So we're going to spend the next couple of weeks eating this bread, eating Jesus. That ought to be good and offensive to all our pious brothers, because this bread that comes down from above is meant for consumption. Jesus wants us to eat him. Lots of fun. So we'll have to talk about that, and we'll talk about it plenty, I expect, going through the rest of the chapter. Steve Paulson and I were lecturing down in South Carolina last winter, and a Calvinist got up before Steve and talked about "these people who think they're eating Jesus." Steve Paulson stood up and said, "Well, I'm a poor Lutheran. I've been eating Jesus and drinking his blood since I was confirmed, and he's done me good." So there you go.

That will give you some purchase on these texts, I hope. God's peace to you. When you listen to this, I'll be on the other side of the ocean, first in Estonia with my brother-in-law and sister, undoubtedly sitting in the sauna together, and then up in Finland for a week. We'll see you.

SOURCE

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Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3vCQixsKbgU>

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