

John 6:35–51

James Nestingen · CROSS Talk

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This is the second time I'm coming to you on tape. As you know, while you are listening to this I am in Finland, and on the way we'll stop in Hamburg to see our youngest son, who is happily married to a German citizen and living there. We get to see them once a year, and we're already counting the days. I'll put one more on tape before we get back to the States, and then I'll come back live with all of you.

The texts for Pentecost 11 put us in the middle of a food fight. Jesus started it, of course. He reared back out in the middle of nowhere and set the table for five thousand people, and by the time he got done he even had leftovers. It is an absolute picture of grace overflowing. This is Jesus at his excessive best, giving beyond measure, feeding, blessing, sustaining with his gifts.

But of course in a death-driven world one of the worst things you can possibly do is be gracious. Think of it. There he is, out feeding the hungry, just giving it away, and of course that starts a big fight. As hungry as the old Adam is, stuffing his face with everything he can lay his hands on, he gets ticked off when other people eat for free. So controversy starts, and the controversy carries. And if the old Adam can't get control of it by hoarding it for himself, he likes to institutionalize the feeding of the hungry, take it over and turn it into programs and systems, and manage and control it. There we go. So there is literally no free lunch for the old Adam, even though he'll stuff his face with sandwiches, hors d'oeuvres, and whatever else he can find at any given moment.

Now Jesus has compounded the problem. He not only fed the five thousand, but he has made the spectacular announcement we looked at last week: "I am the bread of life," the bread of life come down from heaven. He is not only food for the hungry, with meals on wheels that will go out into the middle of the desert. He also has the energy that drives everything, so that you can literally eat him and he will keep providing you with energy all your life. That's his nature. He gives not only what we need to live from day to day; he also drives our spirits and gives us hope and joy and confidence, and above all faith, to sustain us in the midst of the conflicts of this life.

So he hauls off and says, “I am the bread of life,” and are they ever ticked! It’s not only that he feeds the hungry. He offers to give himself away, and in fact bestows himself in this most magnificent gift, and of course he packages it up in some words of predestination just to make it even more pointed. And we’re off to the races, conflict spilling out everywhere.

In the light of the conflict in the gospel, we can begin to see the conflict in the supporting texts; in fact all three of them are rife with it. We have Elijah on the run from Jezebel, who is bound and determined to put him out of business after he has killed all her prophets. In a magnificent display of ecumenical openness, he slaughtered them, and so left Jezebel without any religious support. And she’s ticked. I don’t think “ticked” is quite the word for it; if this weren’t on tape I’d use a stronger word, and that would get closer. She is irritated, hell-bent and after him, and so now he is on the run. He has decided that death is preferable to this. He feels sorry for himself and lies down to die, and the good Lord has to send an angel to wake him up.

They’re not exactly fighting about food, but here it is. Jezebel is convinced her prophets have been her connection to the Almighty, and now they are all dead. And Elijah is convinced that the Lord God is the only one who can provide food and all the rest of it, and now he is going to provide food for Elijah. Elijah is full of self-pity. He is having a pity party, sitting on the pity pot, talking to himself about how hard it is to be a prophet. Good night, there’s not even a pension program for him. Poor guy. So the good Lord comes and wakes him up and sets him up.

Then we have David, who in Psalm 34 is on the run from Abimelech, according to the tradition; at least the psalm is introduced that way. And David, while on the run, sings a hymn of praise, one of the great songs. So we’ll listen to David sing a little. And then we’ll go to Ephesians, where the conflict between the old Adam and the new is going full bore.

We’re going to reverse things a little this week. Ordinarily we start with the supporting texts. But today, because the gospel informs how we read the other texts, we’ll start with the gospel, take our time with it, and have a lot of fun, and then go on to the supporting texts, which are a joy too.

The Complaint: John 6

The gospel is John 6:35–51. The text begins with the complaint of the Jews, and this is a lot of fun. As I quoted my grandma to you last week, some people would complain if they were hung

with new rope. You get five thousand people at a banquet in the wilderness, and you know somebody is bound to complain. And of course the complaint is Marcus Borg's complaint. It's not just the Jews we are talking about here. We are talking about the religiously self-contented, who have made themselves their own project and are pretty confident that's all there is. On the basis of their reason and a middle-class view of life, they have ruled out such things as surprise and miracle. They have ruled out the possibility that Jesus might just haul off in the middle of the desert and do something. As they read Scripture, it is their project, and Jesus is kind of an interesting sidelight. As we read Scripture, it's just the other way around: they are not even an interesting sidelight, and Jesus is the whole story. He is always giving and always blessing.

So we have a complaint. He can't do that. You can't just be gracious. You can't go off half-cocked and give yourself away like that; that's way too generous. "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know?" We know his brothers and sisters, and we know Nazareth. Good night: can anything good come out of Nazareth? What a joke. It's halfway between Zap and some other no-account town, Fingal or Napoleon, wherever you might happen to locate the outback. We in North Dakota always thought those towns were central and that the outback was in Montana someplace, or Wyoming. There you go.

But here we are. They know him, they know where he comes from, and they are not expecting any surprises, as Gerhard Forde used to say. That is the trouble with free-will theology: it rules out the possibility of surprise from the beginning. God just can't do something without first checking in with us to make sure it's approved and kosher and all the rest. So Jesus has offended. He has offended because they know he is Joseph's son, Mary's son. They know the birth happened a little early after the wedding. They know all kinds of things, and they have dismissed him altogether.

Jesus answers this complaint in two ways, and it's really fun to watch him. These dialogues in John's Gospel are more fun than a barrel of monkeys, because he keeps raising the ante. Usually, when religious people get challenged, including us, they start backing down and cutting the percentages, trying to hold on. But Jesus is by nature excessive, by nature generous and gracious, and so when he is challenged he steps up the gospel and gives more. He answers in two ways, and in both cases the gospel comes at the end of the answer, and he just spills it.

Drawn by the Father

His first answer is this: “No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me.” Jesus is the source. He is the bread of life. Not only does he provide the energy, the drive, the spiritual excitement, or whatever you want to call it; he draws us to himself. He knows he is an offense, offensive enough that the old Adam is going to turn up his nose and run. And so he draws, he lures, he seeks, he entices, he brings us to himself.

I’d like to say a little about preaching this, because it is predestinarian. “No one can come unless drawn” indicates that this is not our choice but God’s choice, not our operation but God’s operation. And of course almost everybody gets scared and starts backing away from it. Does he really mean that? Can he go right out and say that? Well, of course he can.

But if you’re going to say it, you had better make sure you say to the people in front of you that they have already been drawn. That’s why they’re there, for Pete’s sake. Everybody else has gone off to find something else to celebrate. They’ve turned to peace and justice and all the local fads, and they’ve forgotten the word and everything else. If your people weren’t drawn, they wouldn’t be hanging around listening to you, for darn sure. It’s not because you’re so marvelously attractive that they come to church. It’s because something is drawing them, and it’s not something, it’s someone. They can’t quite get loose. They can’t quite shake Christ Jesus.

So when you say, “No one can come unless drawn by the Father,” you want to say at the same time: “You have been drawn, and I’m here to tell you that you have already come to the Father. You have already been brought to the Father. You were brought to the Father in baptism. You were brought to the Father at the Lord’s table. You were brought to the Father in the absolution. There you go. You’ve been drawn.” Even if you think God should change his name because you’re a little concerned about the male pronoun, you’ve been drawn. Even if at the same time you’ve been repulsed, you’ve been drawn. Because that’s his nature: he is offensive at the same time that he draws. Lots of fun.

You have to be careful with these predestination texts that you don’t set them out in the abstract and let people go home wondering whether they have been drawn. I remember a final examination I gave once, where a student had been doing clinical work in the hospital and ran into a man who had read this passage and said, “I don’t feel particularly drawn. Does that mean I’m a reprobate?” The student just about went nuts. It scared him to death. Well, of course your

job is to say, “I’ve been sent here to tell you that you are being drawn, and he is not going to let you go.”

So when he speaks of this, Jesus indicates that the energy of faith does not originate in us. It doesn’t start with our resolutions, plans, projects, or sacrifices, with our letting or allowing or permitting or receiving, or all the rest of it. He draws, and he draws you. And when he draws you, he is not going to let you go.

Having said, “No one can come unless drawn,” he compounds it with another great promise: he is the bread of life, and he is going to keep feeding you. When he draws you, he doesn’t just bring you in and leave you there. He brings you in so that he can be your food and drink, so that he can be your life, so that he can go on sustaining you, not only with food and clothing, home and shelter, and everything else you need from day to day, but above all with the promise of the gospel. Even if you think the forgiveness of sins is kind of a strange gift, and don’t quite know about the resurrection, he is going to draw you, and keep drawing you, until you say, “I wouldn’t want it any other way.” There you go.

No One Has Seen God

The second way he answers the crowd: “Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father.” No one has ever seen God, but the Son makes him known. Here we go.

It is a general conviction of Scripture that God is not available to sight. Particularly in John’s Gospel, we hear John expressing apprehension about sight and turning us to our ears. God deals with us through our ears. No one has ever seen God, but the Son makes him known, and he makes him known with his word, so that by his word we receive all the gifts. So although we haven’t seen God, Christ Jesus came into the sight of those who were his contemporaries, and now, for those of us living two thousand years later, he comes into our ears. We hear him, and as we hear him, once more we get the gospel compounded. He is the bread from heaven. He is the energy that drives and sustains life, that gives and bestows and grants and frees and raises.

And that is exactly what he has planned for you. He is going to provide for you. And when this earthly body wears out on you, he is going to raise you from the dead. How about that? He has had you in mind from the beginning. He has drawn you because he has chosen you,

and having chosen you, he intends to raise you from the dead. He already has it planned out. He is already having visions of tearing the door off your casket and pulling you out of there.

When Donald Juel died some years ago, I was asked to preach at a little service we had in the chapel at Luther Seminary to remember our dear friend, the New Testament teacher. He had asked that I preach on this passage: "Look, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut." He was sick and tired of "Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking." This one is also in Revelation, in chapter 3: "I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut." And when he opens that door, you're going to pop out of there. That's his plan. That's what he has in mind for you: he is going to raise you from the dead.

So there you go. You can object all you want. You can say, "Well, I'm satisfied with myself. I've done pretty well. I've actualized my potential. I'm not perfect, but I'm growing. I've got some, what do they call it, growing edges." Isn't that what they say in pastoral care? You can talk about that till you're blue in the face, and Jesus will just look at you and say, "Have you ever thought of the resurrection? Have you ever thought of what I'm going to do with you when you're done? I think I'm just going to give you the bread of eternal life." It doesn't only build strong bodies eight ways. When they cement you away in the ground, when they put you in one of those boxes and pile you six feet under, he will still be able to reach right in, turn the key, open the door, and take you out. There we go.

This is the goodness. So, challenged, instead of backing off, instead of retreating, instead of saying, "Oh, pardon me, I didn't mean to offend you," Jesus presses the accelerator to the floor, and when he presses the accelerator to the floor, promise follows out of promise. "I am the bread of life that came down from heaven." Here he repeats it again, and he repeats it with the promise that, having sustained us with this bread our lives through, he intends to raise us from the dead and take us to himself. That's the promise in which you live.

Does it tick you off? Well, I suppose. There is nothing the old Adam hates more than the pure generosity of Christ Jesus. He is way too good to be true, and so the only thing we can do is kill him, as if that is going to do one bit of good. So we kill him, and he pops up and says, "Gotcha. Thought you could get rid of me? Well, I'm back, generous as ever." So this is lots of fun: promise multiplied on promise, spilling over.

Elijah under the Broom Tree: 1 Kings 19

Now, in light of John 6, we can see the issue in each of the supporting texts. When you start out with Elijah and Jezebel, it can hardly go bad. She is a worshiper of Baal, and so she has her coterie of temple prophets who keep her in touch with Baal. Of course you have to wake Baal up, and that's a big project, so it takes a lot of people, and even so he lies there inert. They make their gods, and so the only life their gods have comes from them.

So you remember the great contest. We have a wonderful story about this in our family. My dear old father-in-law, who died some years ago, and my mother-in-law were sound asleep, and my mother-in-law woke up to find Grandpa with his arms wrapped around her, hollering at the top of his lungs. That's kind of a shocking way to wake up, I guess. She asked him what the heck was going on, and he said he was Elijah and he was bringing down fire on the altar. Well, she said, he'd better get some sleep. Pretty good. We should be protected against such dreams anyway.

This is the story in which Elijah challenged the prophets of Baal. They had the altar up there, and Elijah built ditches around it and watered the whole business down, to show that there was nothing in the sacrifice that could ignite it. Then the prophets of Baal stood there with Baal typically failing them, and the good Lord licked up the sacrifice with flames, and God's sacrifice triumphed. Well, we could have a little word about this: Christ Jesus ended the system of sacrifice by becoming the sacrifice himself. No more flames, and no more contests either. He is the sacrifice that burned out the sacrificial system. So we don't do this anymore. Good thing.

But Elijah, having triumphed over the prophets of Baal, put them away. And now he is on the lam. Dear Jezebel, not exactly the friendliest type under the best of circumstances, comes back and learns that all her prophets are dead, and of course she says, "I'm going to do the same to you, you jerk," and starts after him. Having been so wanton and proud and engaged, Elijah is now scared to death, and for good reason. We don't have enough energy in ourselves to sustain us. Even well fed and grounded in the faith, we still face a crisis like this with a lot of fear. So Elijah takes off on the dead run, and out in the desert he starts to worry that Jezebel will catch up with him. So he just lies down and says, "Might as well die."

Well, the good Lord called him to his prophecy, and the good Lord is going to sustain him in it. So he sends an angel to wake Elijah up: "Get up and eat." You'd better eat, because we need

you. Get on your feet and eat; we've got to go. And so Elijah's call is sustained.

Now you see the difference. Elijah worships the God who raises the dead, who creates out of nothing and brings in the future. Jezebel worshiped herself and her own possibilities. In the end Jezebel had nothing to eat, and Elijah was fed by an angel. That's kind of nice. It's a good way to go.

David on the Run: Psalm 34

Psalm 34 is, by tradition, another pursuit text. This time it is not Elijah but David. You remember all the conflicts. I love the stories in 1 and 2 Samuel; Carolyn and I are reading them as part of our devotions right now. It starts out with Saul, and David has to get away. On the lam he runs into a pagan king whose name is Abimelech, and now he is caught right out in the open, and it looks as if God's anointed is going to die like everybody else. So David hits on an ingenious evasion. He feigns madness, starts frothing at the mouth and running loose, crazy, and the king says, in effect, "This is the great David we're all supposed to be afraid of?" and he lets him go. Big mistake.

By tradition David, the author of the psalms, is closely identified with Psalm 34. And so even in the midst of his flight he sings this gorgeous song: "I will bless the Lord at all times; his praise shall continually be in my mouth. O magnify the Lord with me. I sought the Lord, and he answered me, and delivered me from all my fears."

This is what we say: "Take courage, I can handle this." But this is what God says: "You leave this to me. I'll take care of you." The temptation is to turn to ourselves, and when we turn to ourselves, about all we have to go on is the prospect of fooling somebody into thinking we're half crazy, or fully crazy. But David, even while he is deceiving Abimelech, is full of faith and confidence in the promise of the gospel as he has heard it. "I sought the Lord, and he answered me, and delivered me from all my fears. Look to him, and be radiant; so your faces shall never be ashamed."

Here is the other side. Unbelief is offended by God's generosity. Faith delights in it, celebrates it, rejoices in it. Even in the midst of such an awful situation as he found himself in, David can sing with hope and joy. So this psalm is a lot of fun. You know how much I think of preaching on the psalms; I always encourage it, because the psalms are the prayer book of Scripture. You learn as much from the psalms as from anything else about the shape of faith:

pursued, held in conflict, in the midst of trouble, but full of confidence, turning to the promise of God's word.

We Have Met the Enemy: Ephesians 4

All of this sets us up for Ephesians 4:17–5:2. Here is the gospel according to Pogo: “We have met the enemy, and he is us.” The opponents in the earlier texts, Jezebel and company, and then Abimelech, are internalized here. The problem is not an external enemy. The problem is an internal enemy. The problem is myself. The problem is me. I keep repeating the story of the fall in myself. I keep acting it out as I turn from the Creator to the creation, from God's promises to my own right hand, from God's gifts to everything I can do for myself.

The classic language of the old Adam is “me, myself, and I.” I always tell about my oldest son. When he was a little boy and I was trying to feed him peas, I put them in his mouth while he was crying, which was cheating, of course. Those peas stayed put while he hollered his lungs out. They didn't move in his mouth; they didn't move toward his gullet; they just sat there as he wailed and wailed and wailed. When I finally took them out with a spoon, he said, “My want to do what my can do.” Well, that's the old Adam's script.

So the conflict we live in is between the old self, the old Adam, the old Eve, the old sinner in us, which is attracted to itself and continually curving back on itself, reaching for itself, trying to actualize its potential, trying to become its own best friend, trying to will itself into contentment, talking in the night about how it can comfort itself, blah, blah, blah; and the new Adam, who comes forth in Christ, who is raised by God's word, and who is raised up now as the gospel takes hold of us. This is what makes our theology certain, Luther once said: it takes us outside ourselves and brings us to rest in Christ Jesus.

Inside ourselves, we live as the Gentiles do, “in the futility of their minds,” plotting and planning and scheming and resolving and rehearsing memories of disappointment, recycling visions of retaliation and revenge, caught, caught, caught, spinning, turning. “They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of their ignorance and hardness of heart.” We are darkened. I am darkened. There you go: the gospel has exposed it. Jesus feeds the five thousand in the wilderness, and I say, “Give me all of it; I'll take it.” Or I say, “Don't you dare do that again without planning and making a project of it. We're going to put this under the supervision of some church bureaucrats to make sure this feeding doesn't

get abused.” That’s our hardness of heart. Jesus feeds the hungry, and we get upset. There it is, exposed.

“That is not the way you learned Christ!” Of course not. “For surely you have heard about him and were taught in him, as truth is in Jesus. You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self.” Just let it go. Forget it. That old stuff is nothing but death, death warmed over. It is nothing but self-consumption, a kind of spiritual cancer, where we eat nothing but our own illusions, and having eaten our own illusions, burp in satisfaction and resolve to go hurt somebody else. Big deal. “Your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts.” And what? “Be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.”

Well, here is the truth: he is going to put it on you. His Holy Spirit has already come to dress you in the righteousness of Christ, in such a way that the new self is no achievement of yours but sheer gift and benefit of his marvelous promises. “Clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another.” That’s what it comes down to, simple as that.

“Be angry but do not sin.” Of course, this is my fault. I have never known how to be angry without sinning, because it goes excessive right off the bat; I am a sinner. “Do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil.” I can remember lying awake in the night full of anger, reciting my neighbor’s sins, my colleague’s sins, of course, and thinking over and over again of that beautiful prayer of Luther’s: “Let your holy angel be with me, that the evil foe may have no power over me.” There you go. It is only the devil who wins these contests, when I become my own project and set out to control fate. Well, that’s dead as a dodo. It’s gone. It’s never going to work. Christ raises the dead. And because he raises the dead, we sinners finally have a fighting chance, and not under any other circumstances.

So I think putting on the new self works like this: it involves lying back and saying, “Feed me.” And when Christ Jesus hears that prayer, he says, “This is my body, given for you; my blood, shed for you. Eat me.” Now, that’s not a curse, but the deepest participation, the deepest sharing, the deepest unity of life in Christ. He becomes part of us. He enters our bloodstream. Pretty good. We’ll take it.

So we have a gospel and three supporting texts that are full of conflict today, but you know who is going to win. He has already won in you, and he is not going to let you go. And so he says, when you start entertaining these illusory thoughts, tell them to go fly a kite, because “I’ll stick with you for all eternity. I am the bread of life, after all. I will feed you in every conceivable way.”

That’s it for now. We’ll do Pentecost 12, and that will be on tape too, and then I’ll come back and see you, having traveled through Finland and Estonia and Germany.

SOURCE

CROSS Talk, a weekly Gospel text study for preachers led by Dr. James A. Nestingen, St. Paul Lutheran Seminary. Recorded 28 July 2012 (about 42 minutes).

Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gGpsDFGf-sg>

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