

THE RADICAL RABBI: A RADICAL MEAL (John 6:22-59)

8.22.21

INTRODUCTION

When I was preparing to begin my freshman year of college down in North Carolina, my parents decided to come down to help me move from where I was staying with my summer job to the dorm on campus. On their way down, they stopped at a convenience store someplace in Kentucky. They went to check out but, when they were getting ready to pay for what they were buying, they couldn't understand one thing the check-out gal was saying. Her speech featured such a completely overwhelming Southern accent that they found themselves feeling, like my mom would say later, like they were in a foreign country — or, like the cartoon of the woman in church cautioning her husband as the guest speaker is delivering his sermon, “Just because this preacher is from Alabama doesn't mean he's speaking in tongues.” Nevertheless, it was so unsettling to them that, despite their intentions of helping me get moved to school, they almost turned around and headed right back to Minnesota.

Today we're going to be looking at a somewhat similar experience in the ministry of Jesus — people not understanding what somebody is saying — as He tries to bring understanding to the deeper meaning of the wondrous feeding of the 5,000. It's an incredibly important moment in Christ's ministry so, as we begin, let's seek out God's wisdom **in a moment of prayer**.

TEXT (John 6:22-59)

The next day the crowd that had stayed on the opposite shore of the lake realized that only one boat had been there, and that Jesus had not entered it with His disciples, but that they had gone away alone. Then some boats from Tiberias landed near the place where the people had eaten the bread after the Lord had given thanks. Once the crowd realized that neither Jesus nor His disciples were there, they got into the boats and went to Capernaum in search of Jesus — John 6:22-24.

It was now the day after the feeding of the 5,000. And there was still some level of crowd there, and they are trying to figure out one overriding thing: “So where in the world is He? Has anybody seen Him, you, know, that Rabbi from Nazareth? We gotta find Him. I mean, did you see what He did? Five loaves, two fish — and He fed us all. Can you believe it? Man, I'm still full. We need to stay connected with this guy. Anybody who can do stuff like that I'm all in favor of. I mean, can you imagine what that kind of power could do to the Romans?” So they were going over their facts: “OK, there was only one boat here, and we know that Jesus hadn't gone with the disciples; they had left by themselves. So, you think He's still around here someplace?” Then some people came up from the village of Tiberias, meaning they came from about halfway down the west side of the lake, and came to where that amazing feeding miracle had taken place. Now they confirmed that Jesus wasn't where they had come from either; at least nobody was talking like they'd just seen Him, and He obviously wasn't where He had been with everybody the day before. “OK, so let's head to Capernaum. I mean, that's His headquarters, right? And if He's not there, at least maybe somebody there might have an idea of where He is.” And so, they all got in their boats and recrossed the lake to arrive at Capernaum and continue to look for this most-wanted Nazarene.

When they found Him on the other side of the lake, they asked Him, “Rabbi, when did you get here?” — John 6:25.

So, when they finally catch up to Him, they're wondering how in the world Jesus ever slipped away without their knowing. So their curiosity sufficiently aroused, they ask Him what seemed to be a natural question: "When did you get here?" But Jesus isn't the least bit interested in the details of their quest. Instead, He wanted to get at something He saw as much more important — their motivation. Why exactly did they want to see Him so much?

"Very truly I tell you, you are looking for Me, not because you saw the signs I performed but because you ate the loaves and had your fill. Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For on Him God the Father has placed His seal of approval" — Jesus Christ, John 6:26-27.

Last week, one of the things we talked about was the idea of "conviction," the idea that, in simple terms, there are some beliefs worth dying for. Getting to that place means that we are not being driven by the consequences of what believing as we do might mean, but rather that what we believe is more important than the consequences, in fact, more important than anything. Here we see Jesus very much being driven by that kind of conviction. There are crowds and throngs and multitudes and mobs of people trying to find Him, trying to be with Him. Doesn't that seem flattering? But Jesus will have none of it. Why? Because He knows the truth in their hearts — they like being fed. They like "all you can eat" — and all for free, too! He desperately wants to replace that with the truth in His heart — spiritual food that will last, in fact, that will endure to eternal life. And He's the one God has sent to give them that better, that lasting food. And God has even gone so far as to give His "seal of approval" that Jesus is the one, the only one, God has ordained to bring this message, this spiritual food, into their lives.

Then they asked Him, "What must we do to do the works God requires?" — John 6:28.

We need to understand that the Jews of Jesus' time were being constantly bombarded by their religious teachers and leaders that it was, in fact, possible to live a life that would please God so much that it would result in one's righteousness. In fact, the scribes and Pharisees were counting on it. So, the fact that they would ask Christ, "OK, so what do we have to do, what stuff do we have to accomplish, that will please God the way He requires?" shouldn't be a surprise. Of course, there was no affirmative answer to that question. There never has been, nor ever will be, something we can do to please God. Sin had broken them just like it has broken us. And broken pieces of something cannot repair themselves and become whole again.

"The work of God is this: to believe in the one He has sent" — Jesus Christ, John 6:29.

God had already by this time made His feelings about His Son clear, as Matthew had earlier recorded: ***As soon as Jesus was baptized, He went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on Him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is My Son, whom I love; with Him I am well pleased" — Matthew 3:16-17.*** "So you want to please Me? Believe in the one I sent. The one I sent — Jesus of Nazareth — has pleased Me. To surrender all you are to the only one who will ever please Me pleases Me. That's it; that's all."

God isn't playing any games here. He wants to be in relationship with us; He wants to be able to look at us and be pleased with who and what He sees. So, He very specifically tells us through His Son exactly what His requirements are to be pleased with us. This is actually a wonderful preface of exactly what Jesus will be saying to the disciples in the Upper Room just prior to Gethsemane: "I am the way and the truth and the life. There is no other way to the Father except through the way and truth and life that I — My life, My body, My blood — is providing." This

isn't bigotry or arrogance or narrow-mindedness or anything else that the world might say. This is the grace of God providing a singular solution for making our broken selves whole again by being rebuilt in the image of His Son. It's a mistake to declare that only one way to salvation and heaven is wrong. The grace is that God provided any way at all. He didn't desert us; we deserted Him.

So they asked Him, "What sign then will You give that we may see it and believe You? What will You do? Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written: 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat'" — John 6:30-31 (quoting Nehemiah 9:15a).

This was not the first time, and unfortunately it wouldn't be the last time, that Jesus was asked to "perform" a sign as a proof that, as the crowd said, they could see it and believe Him. So now they're anxious to see what He had in mind, but they were choosing to set, at least in their view, a pretty high bar — their Jew above all Jews, Moses. If Jesus was in fact the Messiah, then He would have to do something greater than Moses, right? And hadn't He sent them bread from heaven? Well, not exactly.

"Very truly I tell you, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is My Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is the bread that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world" - Jesus Christ, John 6:32-33.

As God had very emphatically said to Moses: "***I [— as in Me, all by Myself, Me —] will rain down bread from heaven for you***" — ***God speaking, Exodus 16:4a*** — which is, of course, precisely what happened. Christ's point? It was God that had provided the bread from heaven — the manna — back in the wilderness, just as surely as it was God who was giving them "the true bread from heaven" now. And, just to be clear, what bread was He giving now? "The bread that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world" — Jesus Himself. And the life He was bringing through the bread of God was not bread that aided physical life, but rather the bread that would provide everlasting sustenance through all eternity.

And notice the change of scope — what we might call the distribution range of this spiritual bread. While the manna given in the wilderness was specifically designed for the Israelites, Jesus made it abundantly clear that the spiritual bread coming into the world now was for the purpose of giving life to the entire world; Jew or Gentile, man or woman, slave or free — it would make no difference.

"Sir," they said, "always give us this bread" — John 6:34.

This crowd, however, was remaining in the fog — much like the Samaritan "woman at the well," who was excited that Jesus could provide a water ***so that [she wouldn't] get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water*** — ***John 4:15***. They couldn't wrap their heads around any kind of "spiritual" bread any more than she could understand Christ's idea that drinking from His "spiritual" water would allow her to never thirst again; they were still hung on the idea of being able to continue to get the kind of bread that would keep their bellies full. Isn't that what this Radical Rabbi was talking about? Then Jesus gets down to basics — with some of the most noteworthy words in all Scripture:

"I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to Me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in Me will never be thirsty. But as I told you, you have seen Me and still you do not believe. All those the Father gives Me will come to Me, and whoever comes to Me I will never drive away. For I have come down from heaven not to do My will but to do the will of Him who sent Me. And this is the will of Him who sent Me, that I shall lose none of all those He has given Me,

but raise them up at the last day. For My Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in Him shall have eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day" — Jesus Christ, John 6:35-40.

Now, at one level, particularly at a time and place where merely meeting those basic needs were often a very real struggle, a never-ending supply of food and drink would have incredible appeal. But in the midst of all the miracles of supplies of food and drink that would have been a part of Israel's national history with God, there was one fact they were overlooking: Everybody still died. Everybody fed by the manna in the wilderness died. Everybody whose thirst was quenched by God providing water in the wilderness died. Those whom Jesus had just miraculously fed in the wilderness — as wonderful as that was, and from only five loaves and two fishes — would themselves eventually die. Life is finite, here and then gone. As David had understood so very clearly: ***Everyone is but a breath — David, Psalm 39:5b.***

Jesus desperately wanted to get people to think beyond this physical life. There's another life — an eternal, spiritual life. What are the requirements and necessities for that life? How are we going to meet the needs of that life? And here, Jesus tells us: "I am the bread of life. It's Me. I am what will sustain you. I am what will fill you. I am what will satisfy you." He was so wonderfully saying to that crowd and to us, "I am everything your spiritual life will ever need." Peter would encapsulate this so well in his second letter: ***His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life — II Peter 1:3a.***

Jesus then took the time to note that, with everything they have heard Him say, and everything they had seen Him do, they still didn't believe He was who He said He was; in fact, a good number of them probably never would. But that didn't make His efforts a fail — not at all. Instead, He turned His focus to those who would come, to those who would believe, and He welcomed them with incredible promises of triumph and everlasting life: "Just come to Me. I will never let go of you, and I will never send you away. In fact, this is what My Father wants; this is his best, His most wonderful will for you — that you believe in Me, the one whom He has sent to you and, at the end of time, I will raise you up for eternal life with Him — and Me."

At this the Jews there began to grumble about Him because He said, "I am the bread that came down from heaven." They said, "Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can He now say, 'I came down from heaven'?" — John 6:41-42.

Once again, as we heard when Jesus visited Nazareth, we hear the same reaction: "Ain't this just Jesus? Joseph's son? He's just like any one of us. So how in the world can He now say that He's come down from heaven?"

"Stop grumbling among yourselves," Jesus answered. "No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws them, and I will raise them up at the last day. It is written in the Prophets: 'They will all be taught by God.' Everyone who has heard the Father and learned from Him comes to Me. No one has seen the Father except the one who is from God; only He has seen the Father. Very truly I tell you, the one who believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, yet they died. But here is the bread that comes down from heaven, which anyone may eat and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever. This bread is My flesh, which I will give for the life of the world" — John 6:43-51 (quoting Isaiah 54:13).

There was a slight pause here because His audience was trying to figure this all out. But as they were talking amongst themselves about what this all might mean, Jesus just told them to stop, just

stop, before He continued. He then went on to tell them that nobody can on their own efforts or initiative ever come to the Father. It is, instead, the Father who initiates and sustains the entire process. And this process begins in God's Word. You see, it is God's Word that highlights both our need and God's solution. So, the scriptures with which they would have been familiar were in fact God's teaching them; those scriptures were how they had learned from the Father. And the fact is that all of the Father's teachings pointed to the Son — the only one who had actually seen the Father and who had come from the Father, to be here with them now. And Jesus made it very clear that He was here to be the "bread of life." And what does that mean? It means to believe who He is, to surrender all of this life to His life. And, about a year before it actually happens on the cross, this "bread" in which they are to believe is the flesh — the life, body and blood — that Jesus will completely give for the life of everybody on the planet.

Then the Jews began to argue sharply among themselves, "How can this man give us His flesh to eat?" — John 6:52.

Jesus is speaking in metaphors — a figure of speech in which a term or phrase is applied to something to which it is not literally applicable in order to suggest a resemblance. An example would be: "A mighty fortress is our God." God is certainly not a physical fortress, but His power to protect us is similar. The problem which keeps this audience mumbling, fumbling and stumbling is that trying to take figures of speech literally is going to cause confusion and misunderstanding every time.

Jesus said to them, "Very truly I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day. For My flesh is real food and My blood is real drink. Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood remains in Me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent Me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on Me will live because of Me. This is the bread that came down from heaven. Your ancestors ate manna and died, but whoever feeds on this bread will live forever." He said this while teaching in the synagogue in Capernaum — John 6:53-59.

So, why did Jesus use such graphic metaphors — eating His flesh, drinking His blood? Sounds like some cannibalistic horror flick. Now to our sensitivities, this might not seem like a big deal but, to Jewish sensitivities, it would have been incredibly shocking: Remember God's instructions to Israel through Moses: ***"I will set My face against any Israelite or any foreigner residing among them who eats blood, and I will cut them off from the people. For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one's life. Therefore I say to the Israelites, 'None of you may eat blood, nor may any foreigner residing among you eat blood'" — God speaking, Leviticus 17:10-12.*** In fact, the basis for those instructions had gone all the way back to God speaking to Noah following the flood: ***"[Y]ou must not eat meat that has its lifeblood still in it" — God speaking, Genesis 9:4.*** So it was a commandment that was sewn into the very fabric of what the people of Israel believed and how they lived. And now this Rabbi — this Jewish Rabbi, no less — seems to be saying the radically polar opposite of what they had understood all their lives. What are they supposed to do with this? What was Jesus trying to say?

Jesus was trying to get His audience to understand that, just as their physical bread was absolutely required to both nourish and sustain themselves, He was just as necessary to nourish and sustain their spiritual lives; without Him, they would be facing spiritual death just as surely as doing without food would lead to physical death. Therefore, He was inviting them to "consume" Him,

not literally, but by faith — meaning to surrender to all He is and all He offers, to trust that He would so completely supply every spiritual need for a life pleasing to God that there was need for nothing else, and to by so doing allow Jesus to become a part of our spiritual lives just as food becomes a part of our physical lives. Spiritually, Christ’s greatest desire was to make them — and us — “full.” And just as surely as taking in physical food sustains our life, so taking in Jesus will sustain our spiritual life — both now and on into eternity. Now that’s a filling meal — which is good because no other meal will do.

And not to be overlooked, consider again the phrases “My flesh” and “My blood.” How awesomely personal is that! God didn’t send in a ringer or a surrogate to accomplish salvation for the world. He gave the best “food and drink” He could — His very own Son. And what is more personal about us than our flesh and blood? Think about that the next time you consider Jesus, how personally He gave us what we could never accomplish. His flesh was ripped and pierced; His blood flowed. Never in the history of mankind has so much been given to so many. Love. Grace. Mercy. Life. Wow! God proved through Christ that He would do anything — anything — to provide us the opportunity to be restored to relationship with Him.

APPLICATION

So, moving forward, what is in this text for us? Here are some points to consider:

- 1) God wants us to set our sights not on this life but on the life to come, making a meal that lasts so much more important than a temporary, earthly filling. Six times in this Scripture, Jesus uses either the term “eternal life” or “live forever.” Questions: Where’s our focus? What life carries the most importance — our lives here, or our lives in eternity? Jesus wants our greatest hopes and desires to be concentrated on eternal life through Him. While it is so easy to focus on what is in front of us, we do well to carry Paul’s reminder with us at all times: ***[O]ur light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal — Paul, II Corinthians 4:17-18.***

CONCLUSION

- 2) God wants us to “always want more, never get enough,” to crave Jesus for our spiritual filling. Any of us married, or with a longstanding “significant other” understands this. We start out dating somebody just like we’ve dated many people before. But then, something happens in our hearts that tells us that simply being with this person for the moment is not enough. Every time we are with them, we want to be with them more. Ultimately, we wind up marrying this person because that is the only way our affection can be satisfied. That is a faint copy at best of how God wants us to live through His Son. This isn’t religion; it’s a love story — based on a love that, the more we are with Jesus, the more we want to be with Jesus. This is what craving Jesus means, and this is why we do all the things we do in this place — speaking Jesus, preaching Jesus, teaching Jesus, studying Jesus — to build a love that says, “I can’t get enough of Him!” Questions: What are our intentions with Jesus? Do we crave Him? Is our love for Him of a kind that, the more we’re with Him, the more we want to be with Him? That’s the result that God desires.

We’ll be talking more about this next week, so you won’t want to miss it. Until then, let’s pray!