

Message for the Tenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B (8/1/2021)
John 6:24-35

So, do you get it?

“Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you.”

Do you get it?

“This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom God has sent.”

Do you get it?

“The bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.... I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”

Do you get it?

The Gospel of John is famous for its rich language – abundant imagery, powerful metaphor, overflowing significance. Yet, of the many features that distinguish John from the other Gospels, Jesus’ recurring “I am” statements stand out in particular: “I am the light of the world”; “I am the good shepherd”; “I am the resurrection and the life”; “I am the way, and the truth, and the life”; “I am the true vine... you are the branches”; and, of course, the crowning phrase in our Gospel for today: “I am the bread of life.”

“I am...” Jesus declares over and over, echoing the proper name of God: “Moses said to God, ‘If I come to the Israelites and say to them, “The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,” and they ask me, “What is God’s name?” what shall

I say to them?’ God said to Moses, ‘I AM WHO I AM. ...Thus you shall say to the Israelites, “I AM has sent me to you.”’¹

“I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”

So, do you get it?

If “the work of God” is to “believe in him whom God has sent,” then to believe means that you get it, right? It means that you have a handle on the truth, that you basically understand the ways of God. In other words, belief is about having the right knowledge, and so the principal question is *what*: “What do you believe?” and more specifically, “What do you believe about Jesus?”

We don’t have to look any farther than the Apostles’ Creed to find time-honored answers to that question: I believe that Jesus is the Christ, “God’s only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried; he descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again; he ascended into heaven, he is seated at the right hand of the Father, and he will come to judge the living and the dead.” Sixteen centuries later, the church still clings to the Apostles’ Creed, although I wonder how many of us cross our fingers behind our backs when we say it, or skip a phrase here and there.

It’s worth asking: does belief mean to assent intellectually to the propositions of the Creed, or to any other doctrinal language, for that matter? Is it

¹ Exodus 3:13-14.

really about saying the right words? For his part, the Gospel writer of John never uses the noun for belief, but always and only its verbal form: “to believe,” “have faith,” “come to faith,” or “put faith [in].” So **in John, belief is not a matter of dogma, but of action; in John, Jesus invites people to continuously and actively place their trust in him.**²

So, maybe belief is about more than having the right ideas about Jesus; maybe there’s a better question than “What do you believe?” Consider what happens, for instance, when we replace the word *what* with *how*: “How do you believe?” or more specifically, “How do you believe in Jesus?” It’s possible to interpret that question cynically, as in, “How can you possibly believe in Jesus? The whole story is nothing but a folktale.” But, we can also interpret it sincerely, as in, **“How do you practice your faith? How do you make sense of the world in light of Jesus’ story? How does he make a difference?”**³

One answer to the question “How do you believe?” emerges from the very promise at the heart of today’s Gospel: “I am the bread of life,” Jesus says, “Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” So, **how do you believe in Jesus? You come to the table, reach out your hands, and receive a morsel of bread and a sip of wine. How do you “believe in him whom God has sent”? You taste the bread of life, and with a full heart, return to your life strengthened for faith, hope, and love.**

² Robert Hoch, www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-18-2/commentary-on-john-624-35-5.

³ See Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity After Religion*, 112-13.

Belief is the act of eating and drinking the good things of God – grace upon grace – and sharing those good things with hungry neighbors.

So, do you get it?

As is often the case in the Gospel of John, Jesus' teaching is as dense as barley bread. Nonetheless, the answer to that question is a resounding **yes, you get it, but not in the sense of grasping the whole truth of God; you "get it" as a gift of grace. And, to be fed by the truth is even better than to comprehend him.**⁴

"No one has been 'worthy' to receive communion," writes Alexander Schmemmann, "no one has been prepared for it. At this point all merits, all righteousness, all devotions disappear and dissolve. Life comes again to us as Gift, a free and divine gift... nothing is due and yet all is given. And, therefore, the greatest humility and obedience is... to say yes – in joy and gratitude."⁵ So, keep saying yes, friends, keep coming to the table, reaching out your hands, and taking the bread of life. And, one bite at a time, the bread of God from heaven will keep giving you life, and giving life to the world.

⁴ William H. Willimon, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 3, 313.

⁵ As cited by Rachel Held Evans in *Searching for Sunday*, 144-5.