

Proper 14B 2021 Sermon

John 6:35, 41-51

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

Then the Jews began to complain about him because he said, "I am the bread that came down from heaven." They were saying, "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, 'I have come down from heaven'?" Jesus answered them, "Do not complain among yourselves. No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me; and I will raise that person up on the last day. It is written in the prophets, 'And they shall all be taught by God.' Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me. Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father. Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."

According to Greek Mythology, Hercules constructed two pillars at the Strait of Gibraltar, the far Western end of the known world in ancient times. On those Pillars of Hercules, it is said, there were written these words: *ne plus ultra* – there is nothing beyond. It was a warning to sailors not to be so foolish as to leave the familiar Mediterranean Sea and venture out into the vast, unexplored Atlantic Ocean. Even maps, in centuries past, would depict the known Mediterranean world, but west of the Strait of Gibraltar, the mapmakers simply wrote: *ne plus ultra*. There is nothing beyond.

Then came Christopher Columbus, who discovered there **is** something beyond! And King Charles I of Spain made the Spanish motto to be: "Plus Ultra" – there is more beyond. The Spanish Coat of Arms today shows two pillars with the words "*Plus Ultra*." There **is** more.

In our Gospel story today, "the Jews" (which is John's term for those Jewish people who *oppose* Jesus) begin complaining to one another because Jesus had said "I am the bread that came down from heaven." They grumble to one another, saying, "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, 'I have come down from heaven'?" They knew Jesus' parents to be *ordinary* parents like any other. And Jesus was a human being, just like everyone else. Nothing more. *Ne plus ultra* – there was nothing about Jesus beyond what they already knew about him.

It's a theme we find other places in the Gospels, also. Just 5 Sundays ago, we read of Jesus returning to his hometown of Nazareth, and the hometown folk, who saw him grow up, say, "Where did this man get all this?... Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon,

and are not his sisters here with us?’ And they took offense at him.” (Mark 6:1-6) The people of Nazareth take offense, and the Jews in today’s Gospel grumble, because this is just **Jesus** the carpenter, the kid next door. Nothing more, nothing beyond. *Ne plus ultra*.

But, as we have seen, in John’s Gospel, we should expect there is *always* something more. Professor William Willimon notes that, in John’s Gospel, “Jesus... beckons us toward a thick, multilayered world where there is **always** more than meets the eye. As modern people, we are conditioned to live in a flattened, demystified world that is only what we can see or touch.”¹ Nothing more, nothing beyond, nothing deeper.

But, at the very beginning of John’s Gospel, John tells us that there *is* more to our world and to us human beings than the flattened, demystified, surface world that we can see or touch; there is *much* more! It’s a familiar passage, but it bears listening to once again, since it is the backdrop for today’s Gospel story.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was **life**, and the life was the light of all people... The **true** light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world *came into being through* him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, ... he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and lived among us... From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.”

And, because the Word became flesh, this material world is suffused, imbued with the divine life of God. There is so much more to the world than meets our physical eyes and our society’s inculturation, if we can only be vulnerable enough and courageous enough to receive it, grace upon grace!

Richard Rohr writes, “we know that the only ‘deadly sin’ is to swim on the surface of things, where we never see, find, or desire God or love.”² The only ‘deadly sin’ is to swim on the surface of things, where we never see, find, or desire God or love. And, my friends, we need not succumb to that deadly sin! If we would be courageous enough to risk looking deeper, *beneath* the surface of life, we will see that there is always *more*: the whole realm of the spirit, the kingdom of God, which Jesus says is within us and among us. (Luke 17:21) And I believe that the central work of the Church is to reveal, and lead people into, this realm of the spirit *beneath* the surface of life: the Kingdom of God. “Healthy religion,” writes Richard Rohr, “gives us a foundational sense of awe. It re-enchants an otherwise empty universe. It gives people a universal reverence toward all things...”³ “Once we allow the entire universe to become **alive** for us,

we are living in an *enchanted* world. Nothing is meaningless; nothing can be dismissed. It's all whirling with the same beauty, the same radiance."⁴

My friends, the world is NOT, in truth, the "flattened, demystified world" that Dr. Willimon spoke about. It is, to use Richard Rohr's phrase, an **enchanted** universe: a universe suffused and imbued with divine life and spirit. Poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning put it this way:

Earth is crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God;
But only he who sees
Takes off his shoes –
The rest sit around it and pluck blackberries.⁵

Jesus' opponents in today's Gospel are blackberry-pluckers. For them, every common bush – is just a common bush; it is not afire with God. Every common human being – and that includes Jesus – is just a common human being, *not* a beloved child of God, created in the image and likeness of God, pregnant with God's Spirit, God's life-giving energy.

Now, I had never noticed it before (John's Gospel can be so subtle!), but Jesus' opponents in today's Gospel actually misquote him, in a very telling way. Jesus had *said*, "I am the bread that came down from heaven." But his opponents *hear* him say, "**I** have come down from heaven." They hear Jesus' words as egotistical; because that's the world they live and operate within: the world of egos, the world of our surface selves. Jesus' opponents can't hear that the *reason* Jesus came down from heaven was for the sake of **others**, to give his very life for others as spiritual food, the Bread of Life. The world of egos is always **self**-focused, self-referent. It is a world of comparing and judging and criticizing; a world lived on the surface. And, I must confess, it is the world that **I** live within, a good deal of the time. (Perhaps you do, also.) Comparing, judging, criticizing, "complaining among ourselves," as Jesus' opponents do in today's Gospel, and never taking the time to notice that earth and its inhabitants are crammed with heaven, suffused with the Spirit and Life of God.

Episcopal Bishop Phillips Brooks (1835-1893), who wrote the wondrous Christmas Carol, "O Little Town of Bethlehem," spoke powerfully about what Richard Rohr calls "the only deadly sin" – swimming on the surface of things. Brooks said,

The greatest danger facing all of us is not that we shall make an absolute failure of life, nor that we shall fall into outright viciousness, nor that we shall be terribly unhappy, nor that we shall feel that life has no meaning at all – not these things. The danger is that we may fail to perceive life's **greatest** meaning, fall short of its highest good, miss its deepest and most abiding happiness, be unable to tender the most needed service, be unconscious of

life ablaze with the light of the Presence of God – and be content to have it so – *that* is the danger: that some day we may wake up and find that always we have been busy with the husks and trappings of life and have really missed life itself.”⁶

Plus ultra. There **is** something beyond, something more, something deeper than the world of competing and judging egos. We live in an enchanted universe, suffused with the Spirit of God. Earth is crammed with heaven...

But only he who sees
Takes off his shoes.

AMEN

1 *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Year B, Volume 3: Pentecost and Season After Pentecost 1 (Propers 3-16), WordSearch edition*

2 Richard Rohr’s daily devotional: “Grace Fills in the Gaps,” Friday, August 6, 2021

3 Richard Rohr’s daily devotional: “A Foundational Sense of Awe,” Wednesday, January 6, 2021

4 Richard Rohr’s daily devotional: “Aliveness,” Friday, May 10, 2019

5 from ‘Aurora Leigh’ by Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806–1861)

6 <https://lifeinthepirit.net/category/the-greatest-danger/>

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