

Malcolm Clemens Young  
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Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA Y30  
14 Pentecost (Proper 16B) 8:30 a.m. and 11:00 a.m.  
Sunday 26 August 2018 Town Hall Meeting

1 Kings 8:22-30, 41-

Psalm 84  
Ephesians 6:10-20  
John 6:56-69

### **The Bread of Heaven and the Spiritual Forces of Evil**

*"For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but... against the cosmic forces of this present darkness... the spiritual forces of evil" (Eph. 6).*

What kind of person are you becoming? Who do you want to be? We might begin to answer this by considering what we really long for. Augustine (354-430), the fourth century North African saint says, "I desire to know two things only – God and the soul. And nothing more? No nothing at all."<sup>1</sup> This is a sermon about God and our soul.

1. God. In the Gospel of John, at several points Jesus encourages the people he encounters to look more deeply into the world. He warns that his words should not be taken too literally, that we should be less quick to believe that we understand everything. In short Jesus invites us to look below the surface of reality, past the way the world seems to be, and down to the truth of how it really is.<sup>2</sup>

In this Gospel Jesus often has to correct people who have taken his words too literally. The spiritual leader Nicodemus does this when he asks Jesus if being, "born again," means to go back into our mother's body (Jn. 3:4). The Samaritan woman does this too, when in response to his promise of "living water," she points out that he seems to have "no bucket" (Jn. 4:11). This happens again when Jesus speaks in the synagogue at Capernaum.

For five weeks in church we have been reading through the sixth chapter of John. In it Jesus feeds 5,000 people and walks on water. But he also implores his hearers to move beyond signs and miracles to get to the real meaning of what he is trying to communicate. He wants us to grasp the idea that we can be closer to God than we have ever imagined. He promises that with our whole being we can have real life – authentic, courageous, true, joyful life.

John lets us in on a secret that few in this story can see. The crowds compare what happened in the feeding of 5,000 people to the exodus. When God's people escaped from the Pharaoh in Egypt and crossed the Red Sea, they grew hungry in the desert. They complained bitterly, "if only we had died by the fleshpots of Egypt... for you have

brought us out into this wilderness to kill us with hunger." In response the Lord says to Moses, "I am going to rain down bread from heaven for you" (Ex. 16).

Jesus uses the idea of manna, of food from heaven, to describe himself. Just as the Ancient Israelites were miraculously fed every morning, Jesus is the way that God feeds the world. Jesus says, "the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world" (Jn. 6:33). "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me" (Jn. 6:54). This profoundly shocked the people who were following him. The irony that no one in the story seems to appreciate concerns the completeness of the analogy.

Jesus is not just food for the world, but causes scandal by simply being himself. The Greek word *gogguzō* means to complain. In the same way that the people's ancestors complained in the desert about being hungry, then complained about the manna, that is the food from heaven, they grumble about Jesus (Exodus 16, Numbers 11:6).<sup>3</sup> This is the story of how 5,000 disciples become so offended that they abandon Jesus.

What is their exact complaint? One could literally translate this Greek sentence as follows. Many disciples said that the teaching (*logos*) is so hard (*sklēros*, like our word sclerosis for hardened arteries) that they are, "unable to hear" (Jn. 6:60).

The Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) writes about the difference between the philosopher Socrates and Jesus. Socrates is a teacher. He tells us something that we already know deep inside. But Jesus is the savior, the one who makes it possible for us to understand.<sup>4</sup> That is what it means to say, "let anyone with ears to hear listen" (Mk. 4:23). Jesus gives us the way of hearing as well as what is communicated. For us this happens through the Holy Eucharist or communion.

Jesus says, "I am the bread of life" (Jn. 6:48). "The one who eats this bread will live forever" (Jn. 6:58). And so we have the irony of this story in which people by being unable to hear, actually make stronger the analogy between Jesus and manna. This account of disciples who abandon Jesus actually helps to deepen our own commitment to him.

Jesus is not merely a great teacher or a prophet. That is not what's at stake. Jesus is the Son of God, the source of every life, the sustainer of all the worlds. This morning Jesus asks us to put aside whatever offends us and to hear a deeper truth. He wants us to realize that just as food sustains our body, "it is the spirit that gives life" (Jn. 6:63).

He uses this language for us to conceive of a mystery, that in the most intimate way God can dwell within us. When we open our minds, listen more deeply, when we share spiritual mysteries like this bread, Jesus is in our midst.

2. Soul. The whole purpose of these readings, of the Bible, is not to definitively establish something that happened in a long ago past. The goal is for us, in our own time, to draw nearer to God. It is to change the trajectory of our life toward holiness, to become God's children by loving what God loves. We need this so badly right now.

This week I tried to talk to my teenaged daughter about what the prayerbook calls, "the evil powers of the world that corrupt and destroy God's creatures."<sup>5</sup> All of us know about sin as a kind of autonomous decision that individuals make to go astray. We do not often talk so frankly about the forces that direct us away from the good.

I am so glad that social justice advocates have introduced us to the idea of implicit bias against people of color. These always present, unconscious prejudices are just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to spiritual powers. Fear, bigotry, addiction, misogyny, lust, a sense of inadequacy, a craving for power, rage, violence, insecurity, desire for revenge – all these set off chain reactions that distort human life and cause suffering.

Whatever you think about the convictions of Paul Manafort and Michael Cohen, you must recognize that the current situation has put us on edge. And that is not all. This week I was walking around Grace Cathedral and for the first time none of the people here would look me in the eye or exchange a greeting. It was as if I had committed the worst possible sin. And in their eyes perhaps I had.

It was Tuesday night with our 700 person yoga community and I was a priest who some probably associated with the new sexual abuse crimes that surfaced last week in Pennsylvania churches. These terrible crimes against children and their perpetuation by a warped bureaucracy are the kind of evil that I'm talking about. Perhaps I am just projecting my own sorrow onto others, but we all have stories about undercurrents of irrationality and hatred that cause terrible harm.<sup>6</sup>

Paul's encouragement to put on the "whole armor of Christ" has been deeply moving to me for almost my whole life. We read this every three years and I remember it coming up during my ninth and twelfth grade years. I wore armor myself in those days and I could vividly imagine stepping onto the football field without the protection of my helmet, shoulder pads and cleats.

This image may not work for you at all. It makes physical danger a kind of symbol for our spiritual dangers and you might not easily imagine what it is feels like to be in physical danger anymore. But we still need spiritual protection.

Paul advises us to constantly move away from our egotism and to make God the center of our life. Putting on the belt of truth means not being ashamed of how you appear to others in your speech. The shield of faith is the way that the arrows of fear and anger can be deflected when we trust entirely in God.

For me the sword of the spirit is the practice of prayer which helps us to determine what really is from God. The helmet of salvation and the breastplate of righteousness are the acts of goodness that arise out of a confidence that God is the one who is in charge. Imagine how much more free and confident Paul Manafort, Michael Cohen and Donald Trump would be feeling they had told the truth and done what is right.

Finally Paul refers to shoes as a way of considering where we put ourselves in the world to share good news of peace. It is the realization that we can bring God's peace with us everywhere.

What kind of person are you becoming? What do we know about God and our self? Because we stand here we can see more than that crowd moving away from Jesus. We recognize his invitation to be the sort of person who sees below the surface. Like Jesus we will always cause scandal for others simply by being ourselves.

Not simply as a teacher but as a savior Jesus welcomes us to this table where we feel God's deepest presence in our lives. And the faith he gives us will protect us. Our deepest longing is for God. Let the bread rain down from heaven. Let us learn to trust God completely. Is there nothing more? No nothing more.

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<sup>1</sup> Leszek Kolakowski, *Why Is There Something Instead of Nothing? 23 Questions from Great Philosophers* tr. Agnieszka Kolakowska (NY: Penguin, 2007) 54.

<sup>2</sup> The first half of this sermon is deeply indebted to Liz and Matt Boulton's analysis of this pericope in "Real Life: SALT's Lectionary Commentary for the Fourteenth Week after Pentecost," SALT, 21 August 2018. <http://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/lectionary-commentary-for-fourteenth-week-after-pentecost>

<sup>3</sup> "We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic; but now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at" (Numbers 11:5-6, NRSV).

<sup>4</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments or a Fragment of Philosophy* tr. David F. Swenson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1942).

<sup>5</sup> The Examination of Candidates in the Baptism Service. *The Book of Common Prayer* (1979) 302.

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<sup>6</sup> At the turn of the millennium I remember a surfer yelling at me about sexual abuse in the line up at Hampton Beach, New Hampshire. He was angry about something that happened in his past or something he knew about. He knew I was a priest and it came out explicitly in our confrontation.