

³⁵Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. ⁴¹Then the Jews began to complain about him because he said, “I am the bread that came down from heaven.” ⁴²They 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?’” ⁴³Jesus answered them, “Do not complain among yourselves. ⁴⁴No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me; and I will raise that person up on the last day. ⁴⁵It 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. ⁴⁶Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father. ⁴⁷Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life. ⁴⁸I am the bread of life. ⁴⁹Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. ⁵⁰This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. ⁵¹I 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.”

It was the first two-minutes of my first masters-level class, and my eyes were glazing over. “This is a problem,” I thought to myself. “I don’t belong here.” Have you ever had the experience when someone is offering some type of instruction, and – rather than clarifying themselves as time goes on – it gets worse? Every time I talk to my life insurance agent, that is my experience. When I’ve asked for clarity on the usefulness of a policy my dad opened for me when I was in diapers, I am suddenly lost in a forest of actuarial verbiage. When a break in the trees finally reveals itself to me, I find myself saying, “Okay, I’ll maintain that quarterly payment.”

The first master’s-level class I had was an intensive summer Greek course. On that first day, I found an available seat in the silent classroom of other students. Once the professor entered, he immediately began speaking to us in Greek; asking us questions in Greek. He even wore a t-shirt

emblazoned with a sentence written in Greek. I was sitting there with a notepad and pencil hovering over it for several minutes, waiting to put lead to paper once I heard the first thing that made any sense to me. Eventually the professor stopped, then pointed to his t-shirt. “It’s all Greek to me,” he translated with a hearty laugh. “Heh, heh, heh,” we timidly replied.

Fortunately, from that point forward Dr. Bryant worked with us to learn this language that he deeply loved. One of the things that we quickly learned in that course is that the gospel of John uses the Greek language in a powerful way. The writer is definitely fluent in the language, and he uses grammar and sentence structure that is very accessible for people unfamiliar with this language. Yet, the gospel of John repeatedly uses the Greek language in ways that allow passages to have multiple meanings. That is intentional. John wants us – the reader – to not settle for a surface level meaning of what is taking place. What God is doing is deeper than surface level, and John wants us to contemplate the depth of mystery surrounding God’s actions in Jesus Christ, and John wants us to respond accordingly.

To drive that point home – that there is greater depth to these words in his gospel – John frequently does something with the conversations that Jesus engages in. Jesus will do something, and the people are enthralled by it. Then Jesus will try to explain what he has done, and his listeners will say, “Wait, can you clarify what you just said?” And instead of using simpler language to get his point across, Jesus uses even heavier language. This back and forth continues until the people’s eyes are glazing over. Except, instead of just giving in like I do with my insurance agent, Jesus’ listeners will frequently walk away, often angry. The story we are in is the first example of this in the gospel. It all began with Jesus feeding the 5,000 people – everyone was on board with that – yet as he tries to get them to see a deeper meaning to the event, their eyes glaze over. Some of the people grow angry.

Last week was the beginning of the conversation when Jesus sought to bring in the spiritual depth of that event. The connection was made between his feeding the multitudes to the story of God’s provision of manna in the wilderness for Moses and the people to eat. Yet, Jesus said, that was temporary food, and God is offering something now that is imperishable. The crowd’s eyes are starting to glaze over. “What is he talking about?” Then our lesson today picks up the conversation. Jesus tells them, “I am the bread of life” who comes down from heaven. Some people complain,

saying that they know exactly where he came from, because they know his father and mother! At that point, Jesus enters into the thickest part of the theological forest of the conversation so far. I don't want to give away next week's lesson, but the people aren't having it. Their eyes glaze over.

At the risk that my sermon might be doing the same to you, let's change things up a little bit. I'd like you to take a brief moment to turn to your neighbor and share with them the first thing that comes to mind when you hear Jesus say at the start of today's lesson, "I am the bread of life." There isn't one correct answer I'm looking for, and your answers don't have to match. So take just a minute to turn to your neighbor and share what first comes to mind when you hear Jesus say, "I am the bread of life." — — —

Okay. I'm sure some of the answers involved communion. There is also the "I AM" portion of it, which is a throwback to the name of God. This is the first time in the gospel that Jesus uses this language to connect his identity to the name of God. Remember what I said earlier about John's gospel: there are layers of meaning here. So there isn't only one right answer. One way of understanding that verse is that the bread is the main focus of what Jesus is, and "life" is a quality of that food. In other words, he is a bread with life-giving qualities. That is true, and it certainly plays well with our understanding of holy communion. Scholarship says that John was playing with the language of holy communion, however that isn't the ultimate point being made. To get to that deeper meaning, we need to recall something from earlier in the gospel. All the way back at the start of John's gospel, it talks about how all things have come into being through the Word of God, who is Jesus. In John 1:3-4, it says, "What has come into being in him was life." Life: the world, the ecosystems, the connections between all the plants, animals, and all that is. Life came into being through him. With that in mind, let's look back at Jesus saying, "I am the bread of life." What if we shifted our focus? We had focused on the bread, and "life" being a quality of it. What if instead we understood the bread as that which feeds life? "I am the bread... of LIFE." As in, the network of connections that is shared by all living things – plants, animals, microbes, humans, all of it – the bread that feeds all of that - the source that makes it all possible - is Jesus himself.

That plays right into the theology of John's gospel. The way that John presents it, there is this creation that exists, yet without the light of God it is in a shadow-state. The way John presents

it, God shines light into this world. This light gives the creation its life. The light is being given as a constant gift from God. It is the bread – the food – that sustains all life in this creation. In verse 50 today, Jesus says, “This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die.” In the Greek, however, it is clear: this act of God, the “coming down,” is an ongoing and never-ending act, not a one-time coming down from heaven. This bread is constantly being given for all life, so that all of creation may eat of it and not die.

Too often when we think of “life,” we think of it as a feature of an isolated organism. My life. The life of a tree. Et cetera. Yet, isolated life is not what is in mind here. John is talking about the memberships, the ecosystems, the interconnections that are bound together by a grace that stretches across creation. A grace that binds us all together. Jesus goes on to say that the creator must give of himself in order for life to thrive. The light that draws all things in loves the creation so much that he is willing to die and rise for it.

In verse 44, Jesus says, “No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me.” This is fishing language. It is the verb used to describe fish who are drawn into a boat by a net. Faith is an act of God, not just a human choice. Faith is the action of God drawing people in... some of whom, like fish, might be doing their best to get out of that net. We must be dragged into faith by God; there is no other way into the boat. There is a paradoxical tension, however, when Jesus calls his listeners to faith while simultaneously declaring that faith can come only from God. That leaves us with questions, like what then does this say about the grumblers in today’s lesson? What does this say about people who, by all appearances, do not have a connection to God? What does this say about ourselves, who certainly offer our resistance to being drawn into God’s boat of grace? There are no easy answers to those questions. The one thing we can hold onto for certain is that even to the grumblers, Jesus is offered as the bread. Which brings us back to this table. It is a foretaste of the feast to come. Here we find a tangible expression of God’s grace. We are invited to gather here to commune with the source of life. It is a gift that nourishes us, that fills us, and that sends us to be a people who bear God’s grace to all life around us.

Amen.