**August 9, 2015 – 11th Sunday after Pentecost**

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As we continue with Chapter 6 of John’s Gospel, you might have noticed that the first verse we heard today was the last verse from last week. What we didn’t hear were the verses in between, 36 to 40, which the Lectionary committee left out for some reason. It might have been that they didn’t want to break the bread theme that pervades these five weeks of readings from John. Perhaps they thought there was too much of a predestination flavor in that text. Or maybe they simply thought it was repetitive. Wiser Biblical scholars than I don’t really know the reason why, and the Committee isn’t talking.

At any rate, I think it’s important to hear those verses, so here they are:

*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.”*

The reason I think it’s important to include is that it speaks to what Jesus is totally about in this chapter, and really in the whole Gospel. Relationship. The very first words of this Gospel reflect that:

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God.*

In this whole chapter, Jesus talks about being the bread that has come down from heaven to feed all who believe in him and to give them eternal life. But it’s that eternal life that’s the key here. It’s not just immortality, like a vampire or a zombie, or one of those Highlander guys. The eternal life Jesus is talking about is an eternal life in relationship with God. And it’s through Jesus that we are offered this gift.

Because it IS a gift. It’s the gift of grace. Last week I talked about believing as an action verb, and it is. But all the belief in the world would be useless without God’s grace, which we have been offered freely through Jesus.

Jesus makes a series of statements in this passage, both in the part we read and the part we skipped. Taken alone, they’re either confusing or simplistic, or both. This is John at his most mystical, but what do they really mean? Here’s an example:

*All those the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away.*

This seems to imply that God picks and chooses people to send Jesus’ way, and everyone else is out of luck. It seems to contradict Jesus’ statement that anyone who believes in him will have eternal life. But he qualifies that a little further along when he says:

*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.*

Jesus is referring to Isaiah 54:13: “All your children shall be taught by the Lord and their well-being shall be great.” This is near the end of the book of Isaiah and is part of a description of the blessings that will come to Zion in the future. Since many of John’s audience were Jews, this prophetic statement would make sense to them because God had promised his people, namely the Jewish people, that he would be with them and provide for them always. And then Jesus adds his own spin to it with, “Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me.” With that, he opens the door to anyone.

But what does it mean to be drawn by the Father? It still smacks of God deciding on a whim who gets in and who doesn’t. But that isn’t the nature of God. The evidence we have, in the person of God’s Son, is that God desires to have a relationship with us – with all of us. God has always desired that, from the moment of creation, if the stories we have in the Old Testament is anything to go by.

What we, as Christians, believe, is that Jesus came down from heaven to become human and live as one of us. The text today says that he came down from heaven to do the will of the one who sent him. That will was to open up heaven to us, not just as visitors or tenants, but as brothers and sisters of Christ.

*And then the Jews began to complain about him.*

Before I go on, I want to digress a little about John’s references to “the Jews.” Throughout his Gospel, John refers to the people who complained about Jesus and plotted against him as “the Jews.” Throughout the centuries, this, along with the blood curse in Matthew 27, which says, “All the people answered, ‘His blood is on us and on our children!’” have been used to foment hatred against the Jewish people, resulting in discrimination and pogroms and genocide.

But the truth is, the author or authors of John, as well as their audience, were almost certainly Jewish themselves. But after the destruction of the Temple, breakaway sects like the Christ-believing Jews, were barred from the synagogues, which were now their only places of worship, and this caused considerable hardship for those groups. John’s Gospel reflects those feelings when it refers negatively to “the Jews.” One sad fact is that the Roman Catholic Church didn’t repudiate the official Church doctrine that the Jews killed Jesus until the 1960s at Vatican II.

But back to the previously scheduled sermon, now in progress. In this whole chapter, there are obvious similarities to Moses leading the Israelites through the desert, and direct references to manna in the desert. The Jews complaining is another one of those similarities. The word for complain is *gongudzo*, which is the Greek version of the same word used to describe what the Israelites were doing in the desert, seemingly non-stop.

Complaining, muttering, grumbling – these are all things we’re really familiar with in our modern lives. Who doesn’t complain about the weather, the government, work, sports teams, the food, etc., etc.? It’s kind of a national pastime, and it’s only going to get worse as this election cycle ramps up.

I learned something interesting when I was analyzing some of the text in this passage. After listening to their grumbling about who does he think he is, saying he’s come down from heaven, Jesus says to them, “Do not complain among yourselves. No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me.” The word for draw is *helkuo*, and it means just what it says – to drag, draw, pull, or persuade.

But the interesting thing about that word in this context is that it is in the subjunctive mood. The subjunctive mood indicates a possibility or even a probability, but with an element of uncertainty. One of the most famous examples in English is “If I were a rich man” from Fiddler on the Roof. Tevye ISN’T a rich man, but is singing about what he might do if he WERE rich.

There’s a danger to picking minutely through the Greek of the Bible to come to definite conclusions, because there are many inconsistencies in the way the texts are written. For all I know the Evangelist’s pen slipped in this case. But, that having been said, I think it’s perfectly valid to run with ideas that a particular text or use of grammar might suggest, so bear with me here.

I truly believe that it is God’s intention is to draw everyone to him – that everyone has access to God’s grace. Plain and simple. And by drawing everyone to him through Jesus, he is offering us an eternal relationship with him. But there’s that pesky free will thing.

Jesus tells his detractors to stop complaining. But perhaps not because he’s tired of hearing them mutter, or because he feels like they’re maligning him or getting it wrong. In fact, his answer to them seems to be something of a non-sequitor. But he’s really getting to the heart of what he’s trying to tell them. He says that no one can come to him, meaning no one can partake of the bread of eternal life that has come down from heaven, unless they’re drawn by the Father.

Maybe the uncertainty indicated by that subjunctive mood, is that people can’t hear God’s call to them when they’re complaining. Maybe God is continually calling to us, but our anger or our disappointment, or our bitterness, hardens us so much that we miss that call. Or maybe we hear the call, but we’re mad at God for some reason and we push it aside. Or maybe we’re just too busy.

God calls to us all the time. But before we can respond, we have to hear that call and understand it for what it is. We have to put aside our hardness of heart and open ourselves to the possibility of Grace. Then we can receive the bread that Jesus is offering us – his own flesh and blood.

Before we take communion every Sunday, we usually say the general confession together. Today, when you say it, think about every word you say and what it means to you personally. I know I sometimes say it by rote, and not think about it in specific terms.

What thoughts and words and deeds have we said or done that might be hurtful to God? What should we have done, but didn’t? How have we not given God our whole hearts, and how have we hurt our neighbors? And finally, just exactly HOW sorry are we, and is that something we need to examine, too?

God does forgive us, just as he always forgave the stubborn and grumbling Israelites in the desert. We can count on his Grace, and his continuous love for us, and on his constant desire to be in relationship with us. It’s up to us to listen for his call, and to accept it and allow ourselves to be drawn into eternal life with him.

Amen.