

## John 6, Exodus 16 Bread of Life

The opening ceremonies of the 2024 Olympics last week were nearly overshadowed by the controversy surrounding a tableau, in which drag queens recreated a 17<sup>th</sup>-century painting depicting figures from Greek mythology, because, you know, Olympics. Absolutely, the show was over the top, but Olympic opening ceremonies are always over the top. It's as if each year's pageant is in competition with every prior version. Let the Hunger Games commence. I'm not arguing that any of it is in good taste.

But, to the point, the painting, called "Le festin des dieux," or "The Feast of the Gods," is easily searchable on the web. You can find it for yourself. To me, the scene on the footbridge looked very similar to that painting—certainly more similar to it than to a certain famous Davinci piece. Which, I would like to say, is itself a painting, a representation, and not the actual Last Supper of Jesus. As far as I know, no photographers were invited to that meal. We don't know if Jesus was actually in the middle of the table, or at the head of the table or more likely, if you read scripture carefully, reclining on the floor.

I'm curious whether those who are still feeling offended have looked up Bijlert's painting to weigh the evidence for

themselves, or whether they've just doubled down on their complaints.

So I have to smile a little at the first lesson today from Exodus. No sooner has God freed the Israelites from actual, literal slavery in the land of Egypt than they start getting nostalgic. Oh, remember the fondue we used to get at that little place? Totally worth working 24-hour days.

However it comes about, God's people are whining. As we do, you know. The propensity to be dissatisfied, to scan the horizon for something to be worried or irritated about, is hardwired into us. And probably saved your ancestors from eating spoiled meat or falling off a cliff. But maybe, in our current circumstances, it has somewhat outlasted its evolutionary benefit.

And so God gives the Israelites a little lesson in trust. I am listening to you in your troubles. Look, here is food that falls from heaven. You get some quail and some bread, you make yourself a nice sandwich. I will provide for you. And then, honestly, as soon as God's anthropomorphic back is turned, the people start complaining again. It's what we do.

This longing for Egypt shows up in a lot of places. But one example familiar to those in the Church, especially the mainline Protestant church, looks like wishing for the 1960s and 70s, when Sunday school classrooms were teeming

with children of the Baby Boom. See if this line sounds familiar: “If only we had a pastor who could draw those young families!” I can say that because, as I think you’re aware, that’s highly demographically improbable up here in the Northwoods, even if you had the most charismatic, telegenic pastor in the world. But I can promise you that line is being repeated in churches all over the country, even where the pastor is 30 with a guitar.

It’s OK to grieve that the church is changing in ways that may make it unrecognizable to us within a generation. It is OK to mourn that the days of old are not coming back. It is right to set aside the time and space to say goodbye to that dream. And then it’s also right and good to see what God might be up to today—and how we might take part.

In talking to you and others, I have learned that the history of Lutheran churches in this area involves Swedish Lutherans, Norwegian Lutherans, German Lutherans, and Finnish Lutherans, all doggedly worshiping in their own spaces until that became impossible. And yet, if you look to your left and look to your right, does it matter to you now if the person sitting next to you comes from some other branch of the family tree? Or another tree altogether? This whole community is a gift, and being brought together is a gift. The barriers that kept us apart before were illusory.

So what are the ways we are being brought out of captivity even now, without knowing it? What are some of the ways in which God is remaking the world and our community? And how are we being invited to join the party? Let's let those questions marinate for a while.

When the crowds disembark in Capernaum, their question to Jesus sounds pretty innocent to me: "Rabbi, when did you come here?" And his answer seems grumpy all out of proportion: "You're just here because I fed you and 4999 other people." Well, yeah, Jesus, what did you think?

If Jesus does something puzzling, you can sometimes figure out what he's up to by reading the same book he's reading, namely the Hebrew Bible. The book of Deuteronomy has this to say about the Exodus story: "God humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD." This "manna," which by the way is the Hebrew for "what is it?", this bread from heaven, becomes a layered meditation on a right relationship with God—our role, God's role, every aspect of our lives from the mundane to the sublime.

God giving manna isn't just about God's provision for us, although it is that. Manna is a daily practice of faith, in which God's people receive exactly enough, with no one getting more or less, regardless of how hard they work for it. In the economy of manna, hoarding and storing up against the future is futile, and radical trust is the only answer. So manna is also a kind of spiritual guidance showing us what we need for daily life: "I am the Manna," Jesus says, "the bread of life."

We can get awfully caught up in seeing to our daily needs, constantly scanning the horizon for threats and worries—forgetting who is the source of everything we have. We can lose sight of the ways God cares for us daily. But Jesus, the Word of God, draws us into intimate connection with himself, as near as the bread we eat and as cosmic as the pattern animating all of creation.

Lutherans believe that, in some way we don't fully understand, Christ is truly present in this meal that we share, the bread and cup changing us bit by bit, week after week, and fitting us, humbly, to do God's work. The table prayer we've been saying for the past few weeks asks, "Make us to be what we receive here, your body for the life of the world."

Change is a constant, but God promises to go wherever we go and to provide us with this food, even in the wilderness.  
Amen.