

## **I shall give**

John 6:41-51

A Sermon for the Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

The last verse from the text for today, John 6:51 says: "I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh."

That's dynamite. That changes everything. He is the living bread, and that gives us life.

But you notice that it's different at the beginning of the text, in John 6:41-42. It says: "The Jews (meaning the leaders of the Jewish people) then murmured at him because he said: 'I am the bread which came down from heaven.' They said: 'Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How does he now say: 'I have come down from heaven?'"

We know that saying that a prophet is honored everywhere except in his own hometown and among his own family (Matt 13:57, Mark 6:4), and you and I know people from our past, our hometown, who have become famous, and we say: "I remember him; he walked and talked and ran just like the rest of us. His parents are so and so. How can he be anything different?"

So, too, the leaders of the Jews think: "This is the son of Joseph; we know his mother and father. We've known him since he was a kid."

How about us? How much do we know about the life of Jesus? It's a big problem. The problem is illustrated by a book in 1904 by Albert Schweitzer. In English the title of the book is: *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*. What Schweitzer did was analyze about eight books on the life of Jesus that had been written in the previous 125 years. He analyzed each book and showed that they weren't lives of Jesus at all; they were simply reflections, like reflections in the mirror, of the one who wrote it.

The real joke, the irony of it all, is that at the end of the book, Schweitzer did the same thing himself. He wrote his own understanding of what Jesus' life was and how it went, and it really was his view of what Jesus was really like.

In the last 200 years or so there have been thousands of lives of Jesus, that is, people who wrote books saying: We will describe how and what it really was. This so much the case that we can describe this issue in terms of the study of the Bible. If you're Roman Catholic, you study the whole Bible, but Protestants tend to have a specialty called New Testament studies. If you are in New Testament scholarship, the discipline divides up. You can concentrate on Paul, or John, or Matthew, or Luke/Acts, or the history of interpretation. There's even one concentration called: "The history of the lives of Jesus." If you choose this

concentration, you can spend your whole career not writing a life of Jesus but simply analyzing and recording what has been done about this in the last 200 years. It becomes a real question because since about 1870 we have in the modern way of thinking, the idea that we can go back and uncover history "as it really was" (von Ranke). We think we can find the historical, the biographical.

We need to remind ourselves that if you look at historical records, Jesus is almost unknown in world history until about the year 100. The first reference we know of is about 50 years later at best by a Roman historian named Suetonius and he has it wrong. He says there was a certain "Chrestos." Then probably about ten years later there was Pliny in the Roman world, or Josephus in the Jewish world, and then of course there are more. The point is that Jesus is almost unknown except through what we call these gospels.

If you look at the gospels themselves, they don't work together into a seamless whole. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus has a one-year ministry. In John he has a three-year ministry. In John the cleansing of the temple happens at the beginning of his ministry. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke it occurs at the end of his ministry. The more you know, the more evident it is that this material is not biographical in the normal sense of that term.

Or there are others who say the real problem is Paul. There was the simple Jesus and then Paul ruined it. Or we have modern scholars, especially those in the Jesus Seminar, who have analyzed this and said that he was a wandering preacher and teacher, probably of a certain group called the Cynics. That's who he really was. Of course, Islam makes him the last of the prophets before Mohammed. What are we going to do?

And there are those who have said: "There's a Jesus of history and a Christ of faith" (Martin Kahler, 1892). What we have to do is get back to the simple Jesus. What are we going to do? There are all of these lives of Jesus, and they are simply reflections of the individuals who write them.

That's also true of other figures like Napoleon, Luther, Lincoln, and the like. We are caught up by the idea that if we could just get to the historical Jesus, we would really know what to believe. Of course, this doesn't mean that there is not in some basic way a history here.

But what kind of material are these gospels? Already in the Second Century they were aware of how to record what had happened. About 140 A. D. a Christian leader in Rome named Papias said: "What's important is the oral, spoken preaching. But now that those first and second-generation people are gone, we have had to write it down." It was also said in the middle of the Second Century that the Gospel of Mark was the preaching of Peter.

At the end of the Second Century, Irenaeus spoke to the fact that we have these four gospels even though there were at that time about a hundred such gospels, and they all knew that. What did Irenaeus give for the reason that it was these four and not the rest?

It was because of **the message**, the message you and I know in the creeds, first the Nicene Creed and what comes later, the Apostles Creed which say: "Born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. On the third day he arose again and he sits at the right hand of the Father." That is **the message**. That is what changes everything.

It is not saying we can establish an inerrant or infallible historical record. We could go forever arguing history, but it really comes down to **the message**. As C.S. Lewis said about all of this: "Either this is what it says it is, or it's crazy. There's no in between, no saying: We're going to sort it out; it was really this." Either it is what it says it is, and that changes everything, or it's crazy.

What is this that changes everything? John 6:51: "I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread which I give for the life of the world is my flesh."

What is this amazing and great change? It says: "I shall give." That refers to two things. First of all, he shall give his life on the cross.

In the second place, "I shall be the bread of life," which means of course that he comes to us today in Baptism and the Lord's Supper (the bodily Word).

**Out of this are three huge, necessary, life-changing consequences.** The first one is: "life forever." Not the kind of bread, as he says in the verses preceding, which was manna. Manna was O.K. They had that in the Old Testament. But that bread came and went. This is different. This is the living bread which gives life forever.

Earlier in John 14:6a it states: "I am the way and the truth and the life." He is the life. It says in 1 Corinthians 12:3 and Romans 10:9: "Jesus is Lord." And then in parallel to this in a remarkable little creed in 1 Cor 8:6: "For us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist. Notice that God the Father and God the Son are in exact parallel, and that he is then called "Lord," just as it says in that other confession: Jesus is Lord because he gives life forever.

The second necessary, life-changing consequence is about other religions. Not only is it, as it is said in the verses earlier, not the manna, not the kind of "life" that is described in the Old Testament, but it is "life" in him, and as it says in John 14:6b: "No one comes to the Father, but by me." He is the life, and it is not found elsewhere.

The third necessary, life-changing consequence is that we are given a perspective, a focus for how we live now and forever. This does not mean you have to be "spiritual," or "other-worldly."

It also doesn't mean that this life, this world, is all there is, that's it. No, it means we have a perspective. That perspective is pointed out in the New Testament in two ways. On the one hand, as it says in Hebrews: "Here we have no abiding city" (Hebrews 13:14). Or as Paul writes: "[T]his world is passing away" (1 Cor 7:29-31). And "Our commonwealth (our kingdom) is in heaven" (Philippians 3:20).

On the other hand, we are to live now in this new and different way. Søren Kierkegaard describes this new life this way: It is as if you were sitting at a window and looking out at the fields and at world and thinking: "It's all taken away, but then it's all given back again in a different way." We are given this calling, and we are to live here now in him, forgiven and free.

In the Small Catechism, in the explanation to the Second Article of the Creed, it says:

I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the virgin Mary, is my Lord, who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature, delivered me and freed me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with silver and gold but with his holy and precious blood and with his innocent sufferings and death, in order that I may be his, live under him in his kingdom and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness. This is most certainly true."

Amen