

**Sunday, August 11, 2024**  
**Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 14B)**

John 6.35, 41-51

*The Rev. Michael K. Fincher*

*Service Live Streamed at:*

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/811483157448523>

*(Sermon begins at about 22:00)*

**“The Bread That Came Down from Heaven—Literally”**

Something my sister and I enjoy doing is identifying and picking apart abuses in the English language, particularly what we consider egregious violations of the rules of grammar. I suppose this comes from a number of sources. Our father was an extremely well-read man and tended to be precise in his choice of words. In addition, during high school, both Lisa and I had the same teacher for Composition and Advance Composition—Murray Mossman, of blessed memory. Ms. Mossman was meticulous in her teaching of grammar, in theory as well as in practical application, particularly in the writing of essays. I think Lisa would agree with me that we learned from the best. Then in college, Lisa majored in English. As for me, both my careers have included writing as a central part of my work: preparing technical reports as a transportation planner and preparing sermons and other pieces of writing as a priest. So, the proper use of English is deeply ingrained in both of us.

One of our favorite things to criticize and make jokes about is the use—or rather, the misuse—of the word “literally.” “Literally” is defined as the literal sense or manner, to be exact or to be completely accurate. Although, in more recent times, “literally” has come to be used as an exaggerated way to emphasize a statement or description that is not literally, not actually, true or possible. Such as when someone says, “I literally died laughing,” as a way of indicating that something was so incredibly funny. Of course, the person did not actually die while laughing. If they did, they would not be here to tell the story. So, when Lisa and I hear such a comment, we will invariably turn to each other and say, almost as one, with emphasis, “*literally.*” Our way of sarcastically pointing out the absurdity of the comment.

Today’s Gospel is a continuation of the “Bread of Life Discourse” that we began last week. Last week was sort of the set-up, with today beginning the real substance of Jesus’ message, “I am the bread of life.” As I read today’s Gospel, I cannot help but hear an implied “literally” in various places throughout the passage. Literally as in the true meaning, not to provide absurdly exaggerated emphasis:

“Jesus said, ‘I am *literally* the bread of life.’”

“Then the Jews began to complain about him because he said, ‘I am the bread that *literally* came down from heaven.’”

“I am *literally* the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will *literally* live forever.”

I could literally go on forever. *Literally*. (Okay, that one was sarcasm).

Apparently, Jesus' original audience is getting hung up on the literal meaning of what Jesus says. As we are told, "Then the Jews began to complain about him because he said, 'I am the bread that came down from heaven.'" This is evidenced by their response: "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'?" Their equivalent of Lisa's and my sarcastic quips of "literally."

While Jesus is quite serious in saying that he is the bread of life and that he did come down from heaven, such assertions, without more fully knowing and understanding the backstory, would seem absurd. "We know who this Jesus is. We know his family. We watched him grow up. He didn't come down from heaven; he came from Nazareth." That is the literal truth of what they know, of what they have observed. Not realizing there is more to who Jesus is than they have been privy to thus far.

There are two points of disconnect for the people listening to Jesus. The first is the idea that he came down from heaven, as they have expressed. Until they can begin to understand what that means, there is no way they can begin to understand the second point of disconnect: that Jesus is the bread of life. So Jesus tries to explain what he means, beginning with the part about coming down from heaven. He tells them "no one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me." Jesus apparently decides that trying to get them to understand how he is from heaven would be more difficult and confusing than establishing the relationship between him and God. From there, his origin as being from heaven could be rightly inferred. As part of his attempt to explain who he is as the Son of God (without actually using that term), he even invokes the wisdom of the prophets—those who were God's own messengers. While not readily apparent, perhaps relying on the cognitive leap his audience would make. Notably, of the fervent hope on the part of many at that time for the coming of the long-awaited Messiah. That many of the prophets pointed to the coming of the Messiah, directly or indirectly. Subtly making the connection, again without using the term, by noting that "Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me." Implying that it is Jesus himself who is from God and is sent by God to make God's Self known to the people. Admittedly, a little confusing to their way of thinking, but then again, we know the bigger picture. Jesus needed to help bring his audience along and let them start to develop and see that bigger picture for themselves. That yes, he literally is from heaven in that he is sent by God the Father to make himself known to his people. Our understanding of Emmanuel, God with us, God in the flesh. Literally.

As if trying to get a bunch of people to understand how Jesus came down from heaven was not difficult enough, perhaps the greater challenge is the second point of disconnect: Jesus as the bread of life. Which is the overarching point of Jesus' discourse, with its continuing refrain of "I am the bread of life." Even if they could make the leap to accept Jesus as literally coming down from heaven, coming to understand what he means in his assertion that he is the bread of life is a heavier lift. Equating himself with bread, bread that is not some sort of symbol but something more literal, will be much harder for his audience to grasp.

Again, Jesus systematically builds his case, relying once more on some of the common knowledge and understanding of his audience. This time drawing a comparison between the

bread of life he is now talking about—himself—juxtaposed with the historic image of bread from heaven they themselves invoked earlier in the discourse, in the part of the story we heard last week. Manna, the bread from heaven, that God provided the Israelites in the wilderness. As one if not the most significant and formational events in their history, reference to manna would have carried profound meaning for the people. That the manna was indeed provided by God as a way of sustaining and nourishing them on their forty-year journey to the Promised Land. That the manna they received was an ongoing sign of God’s presence. An ongoing sign of God’s love.

Jesus draws the distinction between the manna they received in the wilderness and himself as the bread of heaven. “Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This [referring to himself as the bread of life] is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die.” Noting that while both he and manna are from God, the purposes of the two are very different. Manna was actual bread that was provided to meet the immediate, day-to-day, physical needs of the people. Jesus as the bread of heaven, on the other hand, has a different purpose. There is an implied reference back to himself as Messiah in the part of the discussion on him coming down from heaven. Recognition that the purpose of Messiah is to facilitate more direct connection with God. A deeper relationship with God. That deeper connection being represented in the person of Jesus. That deeper relationship literally being embodied in the person of Jesus. At once bread from heaven and God in the flesh.

The bringing together of these two images—of Jesus as bread of life and Jesus as coming down from heaven—into the single image of the bread that comes down from heaven provides a far deeper understanding of what it means for Jesus to be Messiah. As Messiah, he is the one who is the direct connection between the people and God. In that role—indeed, as God in the flesh—he is more than the conventional understanding of Messiah as liberator of the people. In bringing together these two images, Jesus as Messiah is also the means of nourishment and sustenance God provides for his people. Nourishment and sustenance that goes beyond the merely physical. That just as the bread we eat becomes a part of us and sustains us, Jesus as the bread of life becomes part of us. The implication being that through Jesus, we are supported and sustained in all aspects of our life: physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually, and relationally.

Jesus provides a glimpse into what this truly means in his final statement of this pericope: “I am the living bread that comes 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.” This statement would have undoubtedly been puzzling to Jesus’ original audience. If anything, it would have likely bordered on the repulsive—as indicated by their reaction that we hear in next week’s Gospel. Jesus, with this imagery, in one breath inviting people to eat this bread and in the next noting that this bread being offered is his own flesh.

This side of the resurrection, we recognize the broader meaning of what Jesus was conveying when he said, “Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.” The promise of eternal life that is only made possible through his flesh; through his death—the sacrifice of his flesh—and his subsequent resurrection. The means by which he succeeds in destroying the hold that sin had on humanity. The means by which he

succeeds in destroying the hold that death had on humanity. The result being a new life in which our sins are forgiven. The result being a new life in ongoing relationship with God in the here and now and extending beyond this limited earthly existence into life everlasting.

As the Body of Christ that is the Church, our purpose is to continually explore the ways in which Jesus Christ is the bread that came down from heaven. To continually give thanks and praise for what this means in our ongoing lives of faith. To continually live more fully into the promise of eternal life: the promise of ongoing life in God's presence, in which we are nurtured and supported by him. Literally.