

John 6:15-35 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

¹⁵When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.

Jesus Walks on the Water

¹⁶When evening came, his disciples went down to the sea, ¹⁷got into a boat, and started across the sea to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them. ¹⁸The sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing. ¹⁹When they had rowed about three or four miles, ^[a] they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and they were terrified. ²⁰But he said to them, "It is I; ^[b] do not be afraid." ²¹Then they wanted to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the land toward which they were going.

The Bread from Heaven

²²The next day the crowd that had stayed on the other side of the sea saw that there had been only one boat there. They also saw that Jesus had not got into the boat with his disciples, but that his disciples had gone away alone. ²³Then some boats from Tiberias came near the place where they had eaten the bread after the Lord had given thanks. ^[c] ²⁴So when the crowd saw that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they themselves got into the boats and went to Capernaum looking for Jesus.

²⁵When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, "Rabbi, when did you come here?" ²⁶Jesus answered them, "Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. ²⁷Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal." ²⁸Then they said to him, "What must we do to perform the works of God?" ²⁹Jesus answered them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent." ³⁰So they said to him, "What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing?" ³¹Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from

heaven to eat.”³² Then Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven.³³ For the bread of God is that which^[d] comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.”³⁴ They said to him, “Sir, give us this bread always.”

³⁵ Jesus 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.

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John 6: 15-35

Communion: The Bread of Life

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If you've ever watched anything from the "Blue Collar Comedy Tour" you probably heard some of Bill Engval's "Here's your sign" jokes. The jokes are about those times when we see something incredibly obvious but can't stop ourselves from asking the stupid question anyway.

For example, the other day I was walking through a parking lot and saw someone with a coat-hanger stuck down in their car door. So I asked, "Did you lock your keys in the car?" He said, "No, I washed it and I'm hanging it out to dry." Here's your sign.

Or a guy goes out in his boat fishing and when he gets back to the dock, he pulls in a stringer full of fish. Someone on the dock asks him, "Did you catch all those fish?" and his reply was, "Nope, I talked them all into giving up." Here's your sign.

So here we are, with Jesus, and it looks like he's going to get to field a few stupid questions himself. The first one is asked by the very people who had been following him around wherever he goes "So Rabbi, when did you get here?" Except in this case the obvious isn't so obvious. We hear from his disciples that when Jesus missed the boat, he came walking out on the water to meet them. Now that is a bit unusual. The crowds expected him to point to the boat, to explain in an understandable way how he made it from here to there, but he didn't. Those who pursued the disciples and Jesus across the sea to Capernaum say that they are looking for a sign, a true confirmation of who Jesus says he is. You'd think taking a walk across the sea would be

one. And if not that, you'd think that feeding 5,000 people with five loaves and two fish would be one.

Alas, the dumb questions keep coming. Jesus explains, "You aren't looking for me because you saw the signs, but because you got your fill of the loaves." They don't really want to "see" what's right in front of them. Seeing would mean changing something about who they are. They can accept a shared meal. They want to tell their friends that they met a great teacher. They would have taken pictures with the disciples or gotten their books autographed if this were happening today. They wanted Jesus to be fan-worthy and special, not this Jesus who asks them to make their lives different.

Ignoring the obvious, they still press on. "What must we **do** to perform the works of God?" "Well," Jesus answers, "Believe in me." That's already what they were NOT doing. They were filled with disbelief. They couldn't imagine that God's representative could distribute such abundance. They couldn't believe that Jesus could walk on water. So he gives them another obvious answer. You want signs? Here are your signs. You want something to believe in? I'm right here in front of you. You want to do God's work? Work for the things that are everlasting, not the things that are here today and gone tomorrow. Then he says something peculiar, "Very truly I tell you. It was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven. It is my Father who gives the true bread from heaven. I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry. And whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

They want this bread. Of course they do. "Give it to us always" – they say. At this point, do you think they even know what it is they're asking for? I'm not sure they do. I'm not sure we do when we ask for the same. We want confirmation that Jesus is who he says he is. In fact, we

want proof – whatever that looks like in our own day and time. We also want to know what it is we're supposed to "do" as Christ's followers. Believing in him is at least as slippery now as it was then. What does it mean to believe in Jesus? Is it a particular formula or creed or getting the correct bumper sticker? Does it mean that we think he pulled bread out of thin air or walked upon a stormy sea? Does it mean that we affirm his godliness, or his perfect humanity?

I don't know the answer, and yet I feel like I probably should. Did I oversleep during that lecture at seminary? In all our humanness, we have so many questions - which means - we probably have a lot of questions with obvious answers that we haven't even figured out yet. What I do appreciate about this particular passage of John's gospel is that he lets those awkward questions speak for themselves. He lets us be as challenged by Jesus as those early followers must have been. It's OK for us to ask how Jesus crossed the sea, or wonder what he wants us to do, and we are even given permission to ask for the bread of life not really knowing exactly what we will get when we do. We come to Jesus because we are hungry. We believe in him because we are thirsty. We have real needs and we want those needs met in a practical way, but with a supernatural flair.

Jesus may be hard for us to believe in because he is right there in front of us. He is intensely personal. He could look those crowd members in the eye, and we're not quite sure if we want a God who can do that. It's too close to admit that we're hungry. It's too real to admit that we're thirsty. We follow his footsteps, but when he turns around to address us, we shy away.

Jesus is claiming his truth, his reality. He is as close to us as the bread we live on. And that, my friends, is a gift. But it takes all that we have and all that we are to receive that gift. We can go on forever looking for signs, waiting for proof. But on that point John is right, to go

forward we must take a step toward belief. And I'm not one for using belief as a testing point for who's in and who's out of the Christianity club. I'd much rather look at a person's loving contributions toward his or her neighbor. And yet, there does come a point when our faith is about trusting in this very personal relationship we have with our Savior.

Knowing that Jesus is the bread of life is a leap of faith. You can't prove it. You can't calculate it. You can't justify it. You can't make a rational or logical argument for why it is so. Can we know for sure that the hungry and thirsty will be satisfied? No, we can't, but we can put our trust in God to be concerned and present. Why? Well – Jesus was exactly that – that's why.

“I am the sign of life.” That's what Jesus is telling us and hoping that we will have ears to hear. That may be where the “aha” moment of communion occurs. We come to the table longing for something more, and we leave the table with enough for today. Our hunger will come back. Our thirst is not completely satisfied once and forever. But the taste is what we need. We taste the bread of life and know that it is more enduring than the transient things that occupy so much of our attention. Work for the food that endures for eternal life, not the food that perishes. Too often we go by the “sell by” date. We are scrambling to hold onto the things that refuse to be held for long. Jesus is offering us something different. Accepting that difference is hard. It does change who we are and what we strive for and how we set up our lives in general.

I do not blame the crowds for their confusion and stupid questions. I'm right there with them. John's gospel lets us overhear the conversation so we may hear the truth for ourselves. I like that method. If he were to shove belief down our throats, it wouldn't work. It doesn't work. Many Christian groups have tried that to no avail. We have to catch belief on our own, for ourselves. It cannot be forced upon us. Jesus never forced or coerced belief. He offered the

invitation, and so we can be invited in. Believe in the one who will feed your hunger. Believe in the one who will quench your thirst. It's all a gift, a gift from the one who loves us more than we can ask or imagine. Amen.