

“Who Is This Guy?”

Psalm 111; John 6:22-51 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – August 18, 2024

Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words that we might be nourished by the bread of heaven and give our hearts to your Christ, in whose name we pray, Amen.

The deeper we get into John 6, the thicker it gets. We've been focusing on this chapter for the month of August, and we've already seen that it's a lot. We're leaving the hardest part for next week, but there's plenty here to wrestle with. If you got a little lost in this passage I just read, you are not alone. I think maybe John got a little lost too. There are a lot of things we can tease out of this passage today, but perhaps our most important lesson will be about how to approach scripture. So often, we are taught to revere scripture to the point that we assume its internal logic is flawless and that if we're confused it must be our fault and not because the passage we're reading is confusing. I submit to you today that John 6 illustrates for us why it's so important to hold our reverence for scripture lightly. When a mere 30 verses contain this many contradictions, it's possible the problem isn't ours. If John had turned this chapter in to a high school writing teacher, I'm pretty sure it would have been covered in red ink!

So what are we to make of this mess of words? Perhaps if we can identify some of the contradictions, we can make more sense of it. First of all, there's the way the story doesn't hold together. John tells us in great detail how the crowd reacts the next morning, after Jesus has fed the 5000, when they discover he isn't around anymore.

They saw the disciples leave without him, and yet they don't know where he went. They get in boats and go across to where they assume the disciples were headed, and there they find him, much to their astonishment. "When did you come here?" they ask, making clear that the thing that is confusing them is how Jesus got across the Sea of Galilee. But somehow, despite the detail with which John told that part of the story, he then has Jesus insisting that they only came looking for him because of the meal he provided the day before.

Then there is all this talk of signs. Jesus says they're not looking for signs, but just interested in filling their bellies. This, despite what we were told in verse 2 about why the crowd formed in the first place, which was that they had seen "the signs that he was doing for the sick." But then once Jesus tells them that the work of God that will bring them eternal life is to believe in him, John has the crowd saying, "Well, do some signs then. What signs are you going to do so that we can believe in you?" It's like they've completely forgotten the miracle of the loaves and fishes and all of their questions about how Jesus got to the other side of the lake. First it's "sign, sign, everywhere a sign," and then suddenly it's "sign? what sign?". If we're confused, I'm pretty sure it's because this is confusing.

But there are larger contradictions here as well. John, as a gospel, supposedly loves the Incarnation. Last month, when we focused on the Incarnation, we used the first few verses of John to ground us: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. ... And the Word became flesh and lived among

us.” And just in the beginning of this very chapter, John shows Jesus very concerned about the bodily comfort of this crowd. He knows they’re hungry, and he wants to feed them. He performs a miracle so they can be fed. But suddenly, he seems to imply that worrying about the physical aspects of life is a lower calling than pursuing the abstract, eternal, spiritual things. Who is this guy?

And another thing... speaking of ‘who is this guy,’ John does this very weird thing where he switches back and forth between having Jesus refer to himself in the third person, talking about “the Son of Man” and “him whom [God] has sent” and using the “I am” declarations John’s gospel is famous for: “I am the bread of life. ... I am the living bread that came down from heaven.”

And finally, we discover that we’re apparently not in very good company if we’re wondering ‘who is this guy,’ because then John’s bias erupts as he has “the Jews” “complaining.” “Is this not Jesus, son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know?” Now, that’s not quite what we meant by the question, but this little dramatic turn has its own issues that need exploration. Because really, it pulls us out of the story to have John throwing in a phrase like “the Jews.” Everyone in this story is a Jew; those were the people that made up the crowds that Jesus was attracting. If they’d been Samaritans, someone would have told us that. So what is going on if John is calling one section of the crowd “the Jews”? And here we are reminded once more, that we can never faithfully read scripture without some awareness that the writers of each section of the Bible always had their own biases that seeped into the text. John was writing his gospel

as the tensions between the Jewish people who were becoming Jewish Christians and the ones who weren't were rising. John's side was necessarily calling themselves "Christians" yet, but when he wrote about "the Jews" everyone knew who he meant. This is the kind of bias we have to be very careful with, because when something like that is burrowed into scripture, it can take on weight it does not deserve and grow into something more powerful than we may realize. The gospel of John is swimming in this subtle bias against "the Jews," and we need to be clear about what's going on with that so that we don't let it influence our own attitudes toward our Jewish neighbors.

But even if we're going to dismiss John's side-eye toward "the Jews" who are asking the question 'who is this guy' we can still recognize that we're asking the question for different reasons than they are. We are disposed to be believers. But this chapter almost makes you ask "what is it exactly that I'm being asked to believe?" What is it that I'm giving my heart to? Is it a guy who wants to make sure every belly is full, or someone who just wants to focus on the spiritual bread my soul needs? Is it someone who clearly shows signs that another world is possible, or someone who's trying to cull the crowd with trick questions? How do I make sense of a "Son of Man" who is the one who "has seen the Father"?

And here is where we need to both zoom out and zoom in. The very degree to which this chapter is complicated and confusing is a good reason to remember that the best lens through which to read scripture is Jesus himself. We don't have to let this chapter define our understanding of Jesus. We can compare what we read here to what

we've learned from all the other stories of Jesus that we've heard and see what sticks. If Jesus asking trick questions in an attempt to weed people out doesn't seem quite right, perhaps we can still hold onto Jesus asking tricky questions with a twinkle in his eye. If Jesus accusing us of only caring about our next meal doesn't make sense, we can remember that he wants to feed our bodies and our souls. Jesus is the lens, even for the passages that seem to tell us contradictory things about Jesus.

But we can also zoom in. A writing instructor might have given John a C or lower on this passage. But in his defense, he was trying to write about something that is essentially a mystery. The writing is confusing, in large part because the topic is confusing. Can anyone really explain how Jesus relates to God? Can anyone fully describe what it means to have our souls fed? The psalmist tells us that "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have a good understanding." There are two key words in that verse: beginning and practice. Recognizing the mystery of what John is trying to explain to a whole crowd here is the key to understanding what doesn't seem understandable. And practicing living it, even when we don't fully comprehend it, is how we come to understand it better. Who is this guy? He's the One who wants to feed you, body and soul. He's the One who asks us to feed the people, body and soul. He's the One who invites us to give thanks when God show us signs that another world is possible. He's the One who asks us to give our hearts to the abundance that God desires for us. Hallelujah and Amen.