

Our reading today starts with a repetition of Jesus' claim that he is the Bread of Life. Whoever comes to him will never be hungry; whoever believes in him will never thirst. It's a claim that commitment to him, commitment to God, means the fulfillment of all needs, or the end of all neediness. We saw last week that this discourse occurs in the context of Jesus sharing food and drawing people together, and I suggested that the bread of life is what you find yourself nourished by when you are doing Jesus-like things. But now John has Jesus continuing to talk about being the Bread of Life, and what's the point of this repetition? It would seem to be now a way to emphasize one of the ways that people fail to take in what Jesus means. It's showing us how we may fail to *see* Christ.

John says that the religious authorities complained—"murmured", the way the people had murmured against Moses when they were in the wilderness being fed by manna. '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"?' They know Jesus; they know where he came from. It wasn't heaven. So he must be lying or deluded, and nothing he says can be good news. But John knows, and we know, that this audience is missing something—they're failing to see what we know is there. The question is, how do you learn to see?

Years ago when we lived in Fargo, Tom and I took a training to lead Junior Great Books discussions. We never got to actually lead those discussions, but the training was great. The idea was to learn how to formulate questions about the reading that could reasonably be answered in different ways. What I particularly remember is when we read "Jack and the Beanstalk," and the old man who trades the magic beans for Jack's cow says to Jack, "I can tell that you are a bright boy." I had never stopped and thought about that comment. I took that

remark as the old man buttering Jack up. I just bridged the little gap between my assessment of Jack and the old man's assessment of Jack with a quick assumption. But the question our trainer asked was, "Is Jack a bright boy?" You know, a case can be made that he is. He's not going to get much for his mother's bony old cow at the market, and the possibility of what magic beans can deliver is transformative. I would have said that Jack was not a bright boy, that he was a naïve sucker, but it might be that Jack sees real possibility. The story certainly vindicates his decision to trade the cow for beans.

This crowd, then, fails to "see" Jesus and what he offers *because* they know a thing about him, which is that he's the son of Joseph and he grew up there. That thing they know is not wrong or incorrect, but they think it's all there is to know and it precludes them looking at him any further. I just finished a very light read, *The Grandmother Plot*, about a young man, Freddy, who's the point person in the family for supervising his grandmother's care at the Alzheimer's nursing home. The story is told from his point of view, and he cherishes no illusions about himself. He's an underachiever, a stoner, lacks ambition, makes a meager living by fabricating and selling glass beads at art fairs. His three older sisters, who live in remote places like Alaska and Australia, also cherish no illusions about him; in fact, they're pretty sure that he's a lazy bum who has it easy living in Grandma's old house and visiting her in the nursing home.

A lot of the story is simply texture, Freddy's interactions with other residents of the home and their family members, and with the staff of the nursing home. You see how helpless he is to make things better for his grandma, and how newly pained he is every day by *her* helplessness and that of the nursing home residents. He loves her, and he remembers what

she used to be like when he was a child, and all he can do is allow her to call him by his father's name and interact with her on the terms that her damaged cognition allows.

So you see him as his sisters see him, which isn't wrong, but you also see him opening himself every day to suffering by trying to care for his grandma and interact compassionately with the other residents. The plot has to do with the mysterious death of one of the residents, but the real plot is determining who Freddy is. Is he a stoner and a loser, unable to follow through with anything, vague and directionless? Is he a principled and loving grandson, who is tormented by his grandmother's slide into oblivion, and determined to be her champion? The answer to both questions, of course, is yes. If you stop at the first assessment, that Freddy is a stoner and loser, you have bridged the gap of cognitive dissonance too quickly, and cut off the possibility of seeing more that's there.

The claim that Jesus makes is that he offers abundant life—not just in some future dimension, but right now, right here. He can make good on his promise in a way that none of our usual [taskmasters] will, whether the taskmaster is beauty or upward mobility or influence or health. Those are values that we allow to guide us or direct us because we can see very clearly how they work and what we can get. But experience shows us that those things are relentless taskmasters that always ask us for more and never give us the life we hoped to gain through them.ⁱ Jesus in John speaks a very dense kind of code, but when he says, “I am the Bread of Life,” he's saying that he is the source of reliable, life-giving nourishment. To accept Jesus as nourishment is to live by compassion and generosity, forsaking cynicism and reductive thinking. It is to develop vision—to catch ourselves before we fill in the gaps that don't make sense, so that we can ask generative questions: Is Jack a bright boy? Is Freddy exactly the right

kind of grandson? Is this a moment of possibility? Is there a miracle encased in what's ordinary right here in front of us?

I read an article in the *New York Times* about African Americans who have taken up the hobby of foraging for wild food.ⁱⁱ A 68 year-old man in Georgia

is committed to preserving poke sallit, a dish made from pokeweed. For the past 30 years, he has been handpicking small, tender leaves for the Poke Sallit Festival that he holds every Memorial Day.

He's trying to pass down his knowledge to younger people, including his 35-year-old son, Seth Gholston, . . .

The festival is meant "to maintain our heritage," said Mr. Gholston. "A lot of Black folk will tell you, 'I don't eat that mess, man.' It has connotations of poorness and rural."

Although pokeweed's leaves, berries and roots are poisonous to varying degrees, many rural Americans once soaked, boiled and sautéed their leaves into poke sallit (possibly a derivation of "salad"), akin to collard greens. The toothsome dish can [send an eater to the hospital](#) if its toxins aren't neutralized. Few people know how to cook it correctly now, and fewer dare; Mr. Gholston, who perfected his technique by drawing from family tradition, is an exception.

Poke sallit is a reminder of freedom—the resourcefulness of ancestors who found food where there was no food, who insisted on surviving and thriving. It takes vision to make food out of pokeweed. It takes faith in a God who finds a way where there is no way.

Jesus doesn't offer answers or decision trees, like "Here's what you should do in this situation," and I often find that quite disappointing. But he is telling us to look harder—that if you do not see a place for hope, you aren't done looking yet. We need to see the options for a better world that are there. We need to envision the time and place when we are gifted with what God intends for us. This passage reminds me of that hope, that vision, and that gift. It brings us into deeper relationship with the one who is the Bread of Life — the one who feeds us over and over again. ⁱⁱⁱ

Feed us now, Child of God, as you fed your first disciples.

Feed us with that soul-food which nurtures enough love within us
to outstrip the fears and enmity that ties the world up in knots.

Feed us with that spiritual bread which strengthens our hands
for serving those broken and lost people whom this world deems a waste of space.

Feed us, so that we may be fulfilled with some of that joy
which the universe cannot contain.

For your love's sake.

Amen!

ⁱ <https://thewakingdreamer.blogspot.com/2012/08/a-whole-new-way-jn.html>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/30/dining/black-foragers-nature-alexis-nelson.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ https://www.huffpost.com/entry/john-6-35-41-51-not-another-bread-passage-please_b_1753514