

## Gospel and Letters of John, lesson 6

John 6:26-71

November 3, 2011, Laurel Ann Porro

We learned in last week's lecture that at the beginning of chapter 6, Jesus was at the height of His popularity during the second year of His ministry. After the miraculous feeding of 5000 plus people, the Galileans were eager to embrace Jesus as their Messiah. Surely He was the deliverer that would provide for them, would heal their diseases, defend them against the unrealistic demands of the Jewish law, and most importantly they hoped He would lead a military victory to free them from the bondage of Roman rule.

Yes indeed, Jesus would lead a victory and be their provider, but not at all in the way they had intended. The Jewish people had completely misunderstood the will of the Father and Jesus' role in carrying it out. The Father wanted to deliver them, not from their problems, but from their sins. He sent His son to deliver them for not just for the present time, but for eternity. But the crowds were living very much in the present, and they were not about to give up their quest to make Jesus a king in their own image. When Jesus eluded them the day before this on one side of the Sea of Galilee, the crowds headed to Capernaum to find Him on the other side.

Jesus was not at all tempted to be recognized as a popular political leader, but He did not want to lead them on either. He realized that now was the time to weed out the true followers from those who would hinder His journey to the cross. It was time for the kind of instruction that separates, as Paul puts it in 1 Corinthians 3:2, infants from those who are ready for solid food. A teaching that would divide the seed sown on rocky soil from that sown on good soil. So He began a lengthy discourse to teach His disciples the hard truth about discipleship. By the time He concluded this lesson, perhaps several days later, many of the people who were originally eager to follow Jesus, were confused and hostile and were divided into three categories:

Group 1: Left Jesus when the going got tough

Group 2: Stayed with Jesus when the going got tough

Group of 3: Stayed with Jesus, but was faking it

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Into which category would you have fallen if you had listened to Jesus' words in this lesson? Before you naively say group 2, let's look at what was really at stake for those who were true followers.

The entire lesson this week on one teaching with no miracles or other story included indicates its importance to us as People of the Word. So let's dig into it together and see what it really meant to the Jewish people and what it means for us today.

"Rabbi, when did you come here?" the crowd asked Jesus when He came, but Jesus, ignored the question and told them instead, why they came –

He grabbed their attention by starting with, "I tell you the truth....." Now, when Jesus says, '*I tell you the truth*', or "*Truly truly*", or "*Verily, verily*," or "*Most assuredly*," He wants you to listen! What follows next is very important. It would correct a previous misunderstanding and is worth a deeper look. 6:26 *I tell you the truth, you were looking for me not because you saw miraculous signs, but because you ate the loaves and had your fill.*

People were coming to Jesus with a wrong motive! They had missed the point of the sign the day before which, by the way, took place near the feast of the unleavened bread. Bread in the modern Western culture is really not a necessity. One could function quite easily without bread today, but not so in Biblical days. At the very center of life in ancient times, stood the stalks of grain, full of essential nutrients, which carried man from day to day. Without bread, there was no life. All their effort to find Jesus, getting into boats and searching for Him, was a 'work for nothing' if all they wanted was another meal. Their motive for wanting Jesus as their leader was entirely selfish and bordered on idolatry.

Let's look at motives for an application here. Some of you know that I took on a few years ago the responsibility of being on the board of directors of my condo association. Whenever someone comes to the door, I am often suspicious of the motive for stopping by. I think, 'you don't really want to see me; you want me to

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do something for you'. If it's a kid in the neighborhood, he or she is selling something. If the visitors are adults, they want me to take care of a problem in their condo. How nice it is when someone comes by just to chat as a friend or to take a walk, or even to give me a little thank you gift or card! Think about those people in your life who only call you because they want your money or need something; do you look forward to their calls? Why? Because their motives are selfish!

Seeking Jesus with selfish motives is something we need to examine for ourselves today. What is your motive for wanting Jesus?

- Is He only a provider for your material needs when things are difficult?
- Is He a source of healing for your physical problems?
- Is Jesus a substitute for failed relationships, poor planning, or lack of skills?
- Is Jesus mere fire insurance that you will not end up in hell?

I don't have to tell you that those are not sincere motives for wanting Jesus. All the effort that we put into pursuing Him is wasted if it is not from pure motives; and the purest motive we can have for pursuing Jesus is simply this:

We love Him! Not what He gives us or what He does to make us happy, but we love Him for Who He is, for His amazing grace, and His unconditional love for us. Our purpose for living becomes not to get something from Him but to know Him, to love Him, and to serve Him in this world, so that we can spend eternity with Him in heaven. And, of course, loving God means loving Jesus, His Son sent from heaven to demonstrate God's love for us.

Put your effort instead, He told them in verse 27 into food that endures to eternal life which the Son of Man will give you. The food that endures to eternal life is simply loving Christ, knowing the fellowship of His sufferings, knowing the cost of

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following Him and loving Him with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength. This love is not something we can fake or work for, but that Jesus Himself gives TO us, and it is on Jesus that the Father places His seal of approval.

In those days, some bakers would impress a seal on their bread as it came out of the oven to identify it as a mark of ownership and a guarantee of quality. We have confidence in Jesus because God the Father has "guaranteed" Him with the Holy Spirit as the real thing....well worth our pursuit.

However, the people did not understand Jesus' words regarding, 'the work of God', (singular) so they instead inquired in verse 28, about the *works* of God, (plural) or the right formula for getting into His good graces. What can I do to make God happy? Is God pleased with my efforts? Those who ask that question do not yet understand what God really wants so they usually they answer their own question in one of two ways:

Do everything I can to earn God's approval, or on the other hand, do nothing; in other words, "Let go and let God." But Jesus implied in Vs. 29 that both of these are wrong answers to the wrong question. "The work of God is this to believe in the One He has sent. Believing in Jesus Christ is not another thing to do, but rather Jesus becomes the focus of everything that you do. Belief is "the work" of God.

- Believe in the One sent by the Father means first that Jesus is the author and sustainer of your life on earth and for eternity.
- Believe that He has redeemed you from a sinful past, forgives you for your present failures, and offers you eternal life of pure joy, free from all pain and suffering.
- Believe that He has given you the authority on Earth to confront evil and to do good in His name.

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Belief supersedes all the works of the law. Jesus first and foremost commands us not to *do*, but to believe Jesus enough to *trust* Him. Trust that He has come to give us eternal life, trust Him enough to provide for our every need, trust Him enough to surrender all to follow Him to the ends of the Earth according to His will for each one of us.

"Well, they essentially asked in verse 30, if we are to believe in You, what miraculous sign can you give that proves that You are sent by the Father? What will YOU do? Our forefathers ate manna in the desert. 'Can you top that?' seemed to be their attitude.

These people were mistaken about manna, Moses and Jesus himself. Manna refers to the food from heaven which God gave the Israelites as they wandered in the desert for 40 years with Moses. The camp was dusted each morning with frosty flakes of bread from heaven. It satisfied their hunger and had enough nourishment to keep them energized for the day. Jesus instead answered their unspoken need by sharing the second 'Truth' statement in 6:32.

*I tell you the truth, it was not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven.*

The manna which came in the wilderness was given by God for a specific time, in a specific place, and for a specific people. The sign of Jesus feeding the 5000 plus people was a symbol of the spiritual bread that would come from the Father and provide eternal nourishment, for all time, not just for Israel, but for the whole world! Jesus was trying to lift the people's understanding above their material, physical needs and at this point, some of them sensed that what He spoke of was something beyond physical bread. Like the Samaritan woman who wanted a continuous supply of water so she would not have to go to the well again, the people wanted an unending supply of this true bread from heaven, so in verse 6:34, they said, 'Sir, 'from now on, give us this bread."

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The people's request for bread from heaven is met by a revelation similar to that received by the woman of Samaria: when she requested the living water, Jesus responded by revealing himself to her as the Messiah. Now He reveals Himself in the first of seven metaphors in John's Gospel that express His saving relationship to the world. You want A miraculous sign? Only one? Jesus declared, "I am the bread of life". People, you wanted a sign; I AM the sign....THE bread of LIFE.

The Jewish Word of God was the Torah, and the idea of the Torah as bread was common in Jewish thinking. Deuteronomy 8:3 says that 'God fed you with manna to teach you that we are not to live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.' So Jesus was saying that He Himself was the Word of God and that Word gives eternal life. The Father's will has always been eternal life for His children. In the center of the Garden of Eden, God Himself planted the Tree of Life of which Adam could eat and live. By naming Himself the Bread of Life, Jesus became metaphorically speaking, spiritual bread. He takes away our spiritual hunger, filling us up, giving us eternal life. To build on that metaphor of bread, Jesus elaborated with four more truths in the next five verses:

- Those who come to Me will have their hunger and thirst permanently satisfied. (6:35)
- I have come down from heaven to do the will of the Father. (6:38)
- The Father gives Me believers whom I will never lose. (6:39)
- I will raise up everyone who believes in the Son on the last day. (6:40)

Not only was Jesus the Bread of Life the sign they asked for, but here were four more 'signs' given to establish His authority. Think of the implications of what Jesus had just told the people:

6:35 The desires of their hearts fulfilled....always!

6:38 I have come from the throne room of God to call you!

6:39 God has secured your relationship with Christ!

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6:40 Believers will be resurrected to eternal life at the end of time

These truths were so profound that the people overlooked the importance of what Jesus said, and instead they focused on one thing to refute: that Jesus had come down from heaven. How could that be? They grumbled; we knew His parents from Galilee! Or, they thought they knew His parents; they knew nothing about His incarnation to a virgin, His birth as prophesied in Bethlehem, the angelic choir who sang to the shepherds the night He was born, the great star that led the wise men from the Near East to His home, how Herod tried to kill Him, and His escape to Egypt. Out of their own ignorance, they grumbled about His ancestry, until Jesus revealed to them the reason for their unbelief in verse 43:

*No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him.*

They were blind and deaf and unable to respond to Jesus' words because the Father had not spoken to their spirits to reveal Himself to them. That reality is the same for each one of us: God initiates this relationship with His Son, or otherwise we would never have come. The drawing by God and the reception of the individual are intimately interwoven to bring non-believers to the point of faith and conversion. That may happen suddenly, or it may happen slowly. It may happen very painfully for some. Then later, that drawing of the Father causes us Christians to want go deeper in the understanding of how God works through the process of sanctification. Many of you have had the experience of hearing something you have known for years but had never really understood until the Holy Spirit suddenly opened your eyes and you realized what it meant. How comforting to know that you were chosen before the creation of the world to come to the Father and that because He draws you, you *continue to come closer to Him* according to His holy will and in His perfect timing!

As if He was determined to try every point of reasoning with His listeners, Jesus then in verse 6:45, re-confirmed His identity and the role of the Father with a

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paraphrase from Isaiah 54, “*It is written in the Prophets, Jesus said, “They will all be taught by God”*. In Isaiah 54: 13, God promised His people that one day when true peace reigns in His Messianic kingdom, they will not need teachers to interpret or explain what God has said, because God will be their one and only teacher. That time, Jesus clarified was NOW! By applying this text at that moment, Jesus was giving a clear declaration of His identity. He added more in verse 46: *No one has seen the Father except the one who is from God.*

Jesus had seen the Father. Even Moses, a friend of God, when He asked to see God’s glory was told that no one could see His face and live. (Exodus 34:20) The Jews knew that not even the High Priest could enter the Holy of Holies and live if God showed up. The fact that Jesus had seen the Father and was here to tell about it was another clear declaration of Who He was.

But believing in Jesus now took on a deeper meaning as He added this zinger in verse 51: .....*this bread is my flesh which I give for the life of the world.*

In the synoptic Gospels, Jesus taught in parables for those with ears to hear. His message was often symbolic of a hidden reality. The pearl of great price, the widow’s lost coin, the Prodigal Son, the foolish virgins, and many others. The entire Old Testament was symbolic of the redemption story, a metaphor for His message, His mission, and the love of the Father. But they were unable to stomach the idea of eating human flesh. Notice the increase in intensity; the people were grumbling before, but now they argued: “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?”

Jesus, of course, was not teaching cannibalism. In chapter 6:4, John noted that the Jewish Passover was near and they would all have been aware of the symbolism of the blood of the Passover lamb which served as a sign for the angel of death to pass –over those with the blood of the lamb on the door posts. John

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was careful to note the season of Passover for another reason spoken of in Exodus 12:8.

*That same night they are to eat the meat roasted over the fire along with bitter herbs, and bread made without yeast.*

They were to *eat the meat* of the lamb. Jesus' words about eating His flesh were directly related to the symbolism surrounding this Passover meal. The meat of the Passover lamb would soon be consumed as they remembered their deliverance from bondage and the journey out of Egypt. Now the One whom John the Baptist had declared to be the *Lamb of God* was standing before them, a fulfillment of that event would soon take place as the perfect Lamb of God was preparing to take away the sin of the world.

Think about the reality behind Jesus' words about eating His flesh. You've heard the saying, 'you are what you eat'. Through the process of digestion, a miracle in chemistry, food is broken down into molecules which are absorbed into the blood stream one by one food you consumed just before you sat down today, will become skin cells, bone cells, brain cells, nerve cells, muscle, completely indistinguishable from the substance eaten a day or before!

That's what Jesus meant by eating His flesh; when we take in Christ, the Bread of Life, He becomes an integral part of our cell life, in fact, holding all cells together, becoming that protein molecule, the cross-shaped laminin, in Whom we live, move and have our very being. (laminin? Google it! fascinating)

Jesus had told the disciples in John 4:34 that His food was to do the will of the Father and finish His work. Jesus Himself was embodiment of the Father's Word, The Father's Will, and His Work. The driving force of Jesus' life was towards God. From that nourishment, that 'food', He received His strength, His direction, His motivation, and His passion for living.

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Christ as the living Word, integrated into our cells, indeed our very lives, becomes the essence of who we are. As our food becomes the building blocks of our cells, grows us, re-forms us, energizes us, strengthens us, so too does Christ become the spiritual building block that changes us spiritually from sinner to saint.

Hebrews 4:12 tells us that the Word of God is sharper then a double edged sword, dividing the soul and spirit, and judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Jesus' words were dividing the attitudes of those in the crowd. But Jesus was not finished stunning them, and He weeded out the weak of heart with His next 'I tell you the truth statement' in verse 56.

*I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you.*

Drink His blood? And this was in the synagogue no less! According to the Law of Moses, drinking or tasting of blood was unlawful, and in fact they drained the blood from every animal before eating any meat. Blood was the vehicle of life and it was to be poured out on the altar as a sacrifice to God. The symbolism of Passover was about to become reality. He was the lamb who would be led to the slaughter and that it would be His blood, which would be shed for the remission of the sins of the world, that would bring about the victory over death. To drink the blood of Christ meant first to recognize their sin and then the need for to appropriate His sacrifice as a once for all atonement for it. Not an easy assignment for those who asked earlier, "What must we do to do the works God requires?"

On this side of the New Testament, where we commemorate Christ's sacrifice with neat little pieces of cracker and cups of juice on a regular basis, the symbol of the bread and blood sacrifice is easier to swallow, but the Jews listening to Jesus now were angry and frustrated. This fellow was no rabbi! Their hero was a

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hoax, a cruel deception and their dream of this man being their Messiah was shattered. In verse 60, many said, *“This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?”*

Even His inner core of disciples was confused. Indeed, here was the great divide. Jesus was not in a popularity contest for their affections, and He knew they could not receive His words, trust His mission, believe in Him as their true Lamb of God, giving His flesh and blood, unless the Father had drawn them first. Nevertheless, He made one last offer in verse 62 to those with ears to hear. “What if you see the Son of Man ascend to where He was before?” Certainly they would believe in Him then when they saw Him ascending into heaven after His resurrection!

Earlier, in verse 6:30, the people had asked Jesus, ‘What sign will you give us so that we may believe in You?’

And Jesus had given them several:

1. Jesus had come from heaven
2. Jesus has seen the Father
3. Jesus is the bread of life
4. Jesus’ followers were given by God, and would never be taken away
5. Belief in Jesus meant eternal life
6. Jesus was the Lamb of God who would die for their sins
7. Jesus would ascend into heaven again
8. Jesus would resurrect His believers on the last day

But His words were not convincing enough for most and in verse 64 Jesus acknowledged, *“Yet there are some of you who do not believe. ”*

Then, *the Father withdrew His loving hand and we read with great sadness, verse 66: “Many of His disciples turned back and no longer followed Him. ”*

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Jesus knew at this point in His ministry, He could not allow those who wanted to sweep him into a leadership of their own design to continue to influence the rest of His true followers. He released them to leave. They were followers in the sense of having come to Jesus initially, but they were not true disciples. The soil in their hearts was rocky and could not take root. The cost of following Jesus was too great.

Many people today fall away at different points in their walk; They may have come to Jesus with false motives in the first place. Perhaps they liked the idea of heaven, wanted to join friends, to find a solution to their problems, get healing or comfort, or perhaps they hoped that Jesus would compensate for other failures in their lives. They may have bought into an illusion that their works, their baptism, their regular church attendance, their church activities have all made them true disciples. But when they realize that they must eat the Bread of Life and follow the entire Word of God and not just the parts with which they agree, and then drink His Blood, by appropriating His sacrifice on the Cross instead of working for it our way, some turn away and quit following Him.

I have to give credit to the deserters for leaving then rather than being hypocritical followers. At least they were honest. If they could not tolerate talk about eating His flesh and drinking His blood, they would be even more offended by Jesus' crucifixion as a criminal. Jesus did not reason with them to come back; He only needed a faithful few to endure with Him to the cross. Jesus would carry on His mission without them.

The disciples must have watched in dismay as once large crowd shrunk down to a tiny remnant. They were probably questioning their own level of commitment. They had given up much and had no idea of what lay ahead. Jesus watched the crowd drift away and He turned to ask the Twelve, "You do not want to leave too, do you?" A penetrating question.

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Last chance.....Jesus was offering them a way out. Save their reputation with the world, go back to their law abiding, comfortable, “normal” life. Peter spoke on their behalf, *“Lord, to whom shall we go?”*

The Father had called them; the Spirit had opened their hearts. They remembered that John had called Jesus the Lamb of God. They remembered the new wine at Cana, the picnic for thousands, the One who walked out to them on the sea. Three times, they heard Him say, “I will raise him up on the last day,” an amazing promise of resurrection in the age to come. They looked at each other, and with the certainty of one who does not know anything except that they loved this Man, they took a step of great faith and essentially said, ‘we’re in for the long haul.’

*“You alone have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that You are the Holy One of God”*

Have you reached the point in your life where nothing else matters but following the Holy One of God? Jesus’ true disciples had reached that point. They did not know the whole picture. They had no financial security. They did not really know if Jesus would come through with His promises. Their faith was not sight.

It’s one thing to agree to follow Jesus when you are at the end of your rope, your health is ebbing away, your relationships have failed, and your financial problems are insurmountable. It makes perfect sense to give it all to Jesus when you have nowhere else to turn. It’s an easier faith when you are desperate.

On the other hand, it’s far more risky to agree to follow Jesus when you are at the top of your game. When you have money in the bank or a retirement plan in place, when your kids and grandkids give you purpose, when you have the comforts that life in America affords. That’s a different challenge to follow Jesus when from a worldly point of view; you have a lot to lose.

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The Twelve had a lot to lose. They were young and healthy, had families that they had left behind, they had careers and reputations. And, yet they left it all to follow a man who spoke in crazy-sounding metaphors. How many of us would have done what they did and leave our families, our jobs, our friends and connections, our homes if Jesus just showed up and said, "Follow Me"? It's time to decide which group we are in.

Group 1: Left Jesus when the going got tough

Group 2: Stayed with Jesus when the going got tough

Group of 3: Stayed with Jesus, but was faking it (with a back up plan)

Would you have turned away because His words were hard to accept? I've considered that I might have done that. I take things pretty literally and Jesus words would have made me uncomfortable.

How about group 2? That is where we would WANT to be, but remember; Jesus did not say that we could follow Him AND have a bunch of other distractions in our lives. To say that we are true disciples just because we do some Christian things may be giving false comfort each other.

How about group 3? There's only Judas in that group; Judas did not leave when the going got tough, but Judas was a hypocrite. Judas stayed with Jesus followers, he looked like a follower; he acted like a follower, but Judas didn't trust Jesus' plan and instead behind the scenes, set up his resources so that if Jesus did not come through as the Messiah, Judas would be okay. Judas wanted to have a back-up plan. Don't most of us have a back-up plan in place in case Jesus doesn't really come through? Our homes, our stuff, our families, our savings? Jesus said that Judas was a devil, and maybe we need take an honest inventory to see if something in our back up plan is a tool of the enemy to keep us for a whole-hearted commitment to follow Christ.

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There is a cost to be in the group of true disciples:

- A true disciple follows Jesus with a pure motive.
- A true disciple follows when the going gets tough....and leaves everything else.
- A true disciple has no other back-up plan but Jesus.

So when I ask myself which group would I have been in back then? I am chagrined to say that I would not likely have been one of those in group 2 if I listened to Jesus at the time He was teaching. I'm just too practical to have believed His words.....unless the Father had really called me first.

But fortunately, I live on this side of Jesus' death and resurrection. I have tasted the Bread of Life and I want more. And I have come to believe that His Blood has paid the price for my past, present, and future sins. And I look forward to being raised up on the last day.

And the back-up plan? Well, I'm working on it....letting things go that hinder the call to follow Jesus, and saying no to working for food that spoils. I encourage you to do the same, so that when Jesus asks you, "You don't want to leave, do you?" We can each honestly say, "Lord, there is no one else to follow; You alone have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that You are the Holy One of God."