

In particular, the Jews complain about Jesus because he said, *I am the bread that came down from heaven*. They know that he's the son of Joseph and Mary, a couple of regular Galileans that they know personally. With the two of them as his parents, they wonder how he can say, "I have come down from heaven" (vv. 41-42).

Good question. If the 10-year-old daughter of your next-door neighbor claims, "I have come down from heaven," you're going to assume that she has an active imagination. If the 30-year-old daughter of a neighbor says, "I have come down from heaven," you might recommend a visit to a mental health professional. She's not peaches. She's bananas.

The Jews in this passage aren't necessarily opponents of Jesus. No evidence that they're as antagonistic as the religious authorities who plan to kill him (5:18) and hand him over to the Romans for crucifixion (18:30). These Jews, are confused and concerned.

Maybe Jesus has been spending too much time with the Gentiles. Galilee was a multicultural place, sometimes referred to as "Galilee of the Gentiles" (Matt. 4:15). As a resident of this region, Jesus might have heard about the Greek gods who ate sweet ambrosia, a heavenly food consumed on Mount Olympus. Some scholars think that ambrosia was honey, while others speculate that it was psychoactive mushrooms. But whatever it was, it seemingly bestowed immortality on whoever consumed it.

But Jesus doesn't say, "I am ambrosia." Instead, he claims, "I am the bread of life." He goes on to say, *Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life* (v. 47). This is the first clue to understanding what he's talking about: ***Belief is the key to receiving the benefits of the bread of life***. Immortality does not come to those who eat peaches from Xi Wang-mu's garden, to those who get their hands on some sweet ambrosia, or to those who grab a loaf of pumpernickel. Eternal life comes from putting faith in Jesus Christ. It's not about the bread. It's about the belief.

Just a few centuries after Jesus said "I am the bread of life," Saint Augustine preached about the connection between faith and the bread of life. In a sermon on Holy Communion, he said, "What you see is the bread and the chalice; that is what your own eyes report to you. But what your faith obliges you to accept is that the bread is the body of Christ and the chalice the blood of Christ."

With your eyes you see bread, of course. But with your faith you receive the body of Christ. So Jesus is inviting us to believe in him and to receive the eternal life that he offers us. *I am the bread of life*, he says to the Jews by the Sea of Galilee. And he reminds them: *Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died* (vv. 48-49). The ancient Israelites ate the bread that God gave them, but it was physical bread, the kind that you can see with your eyes and taste in your mouth.

In contrast, Jesus offers the gift of himself - living bread. *This is the bread that comes down from heaven*, he explains, *so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven* (vv. 50-51). The second clue that Jesus offers is that **living bread is not bread at all - it's a living person**. Jesus does not want the Jews to get stuck on the idea of physical bread, even though they know the amazing story of manna in the wilderness. Don't get distracted, says Jesus. Remember: Belief is the key. And if you want to see living bread, look to me.

Whoever eats of this bread will live forever, promises Jesus; *and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh* (v. 51). Jesus wants us to believe in him and to take him into ourselves, much as we would eat a piece of bread, digest it and incorporate it into our bodies. Jesus invites us to trust that he is the living bread that has come down from heaven - bread that is broken in communion, just as Christ's body is broken on the cross.

These words echo earlier lines from the gospel of John, when *the Word became flesh and lived among us* (1:14), and when *God so loved the world that he gave his only Son* (3:14). Bread. Flesh. Life of the world. Love for the world. The bread that Jesus gives for the life of the world is nothing less than his very own flesh.

There are many stories about heavenly beings and food, but most of them involve the gods taking something instead of giving something. In China, the trickster god Monkey devoured an entire crop of the peaches of immortality. For his naughtiness, this bad monkey was forced to eat stone fruit for eternity. In the Australian outback, a gluttonous god named Luma-luma took more food than his fair share at local feasts. He was shunned for this behavior, but then went too far. After raiding a mortuary for a snack, the tribesmen banded together and drove him into the sea.

But **Jesus is all about giving, not taking**. This is the third clue for us to see. The bread that he gives for the life of the world is his very own flesh - the body of Christ, broken for us. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever.

Beginning with belief, we can trust Jesus to be at work inside us. Because he forgives us, we can forgive others. Because he loves us, we can love others. Because he fills us with his Spirit, we can inspire others. After receiving the body of Christ in worship, we can go out to be the body of Christ in the world.

We then discover that living bread is not bread at all. Instead, the bread of life is a flesh-and-blood person. In Jesus we see God at work, offering people the nourishment they need for life. He teaches, preaches, heals, helps, forgives and guides. He's our most fundamental spiritual food group, the one who speaks, according to his disciple Peter, *the words of eternal life* (v. 68). Without this bread, our souls will surely starve.

Finally, Jesus is all about giving, not taking. We see him offering his welcome to tax collectors, his healing to lepers, his blessing to children, his forgiveness to sinners, and a feast of fish and bread to thousands of hungry people. As his disciples, we're challenged to take the same actions by showing hospitality to the strangers at our doors, supporting medical missions to underserved communities, helping children to feel welcome in worship, offering forgiveness to the people who hurt us, and feeding the hungry families who are living all around us.

Believe. Look to Jesus. Give. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever. That's a menu for eternal life.

Sources:

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Eating for Eternal Life

Sunday, August 9, 2015

The Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

John 6:35, 41-51

What if Jesus said, "I am the peach of life"? Not the bread - the peach. "I am the peach of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." The communion services in churches around the world would be forever changed. Instead of squares of bread, we'd be eating slices of peaches.

Of course, the breaking of the bread would be a bit of a problem. Kind of hard to break a peach. But peaches have a connection to eternal life, at least in China. The peaches grown in the garden of the goddess Xi Wang-mu [pronounced Shee Wong moo] are an example of godly gastronomy.

According to Chinese mythology, the gods are nourished by a steady diet of special peaches that take thousands of years to ripen. Called "the peaches of immortality," they come from Xi Wang-mu's garden, and give long life to anyone who eats them - in fact, 3,000 years from a single peach. The goddess was famous for serving these peaches to her guests, who would then become immortal.

But Jesus doesn't say, "I am the peach of life." Instead, he asserts, *I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty* (v. 35). The person who eats this bread is promised endless satisfaction - freedom from hunger and thirst - and life everlasting (v. 51).

Eat this bread, and you're eating for eternal life. But not everyone believes what Jesus says. Some people listening to him on the shore of the Sea of Galilee are very skeptical - much as we are when we hear the myth of the Chinese peaches of immortality.