

Holy Textures

Understanding the Bible in its own time and in ours

John 6:24-35

Year B, Season of Pentecost

Proper 13, Ordinary Time 18

Sunday Between July 31 and August 6 Inclusive

9th Sunday After Pentecost 2009

Read the passage: [The Message](#) or [The New Revised Standard Version \(NRSV\)](#).

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As always with John, it is important to remember that John is not writing a daily diary - "What I did with Jesus today" - nor a historical biography - "Jesus: The Man, His Times, His Achievements."

John is writing at the end of his life, at the end of the first century (nearly 70 years after Jesus' execution and resurrection), at a time when the early Christian communities are under severe persecution from the Romans, and have lost all connections with their original Jewish roots. He is NOT writing to "the general public." He is writing to a threatened, small, inner group, who have no first-hand memory or experience of Jesus or of being Jewish. Their physical - and more importantly - their eternal lives are at stake. They need to "see" Jesus. They need to be embedded in Jesus, abiding in Jesus, so that they can withstand the fear and pain of Roman arrest, torture, and bloody executions.

John has "seen" Jesus. Not just with his physical eyes. John has "seen" who Jesus is - the one whom the Father has sent - and he has "seen" the significance of this and how / why the rest of us must also "see" and respond. (The word "see" occurs 49 times in John, almost all in relation to seeing Jesus, his works, his glory, eternal life, etc. etc.)

However, in the first century Mediterranean world, publicly establishing that any person deserved higher status and higher honour than what they had been born into was a much more complicated matter than it is today. In Jesus' day, it would bring **DIS**honour and shame to draw attention to oneself, to launch a media campaign, appear on talk shows to promote one's greatness.

On the other hand, Jesus **DOES** go about publically teaching and doing signs. This attracts attention and provokes from the crowd and authorities the questions, "Just who is this guy? What right does he have doing these amazing things?" Thus in the gospels, Jesus is constantly being asked "Where are you from (that is, who is your father and what village are you from)," which is to ask, "Tell us what your place / rank / social status in society is." But it would be **DIS**honourable for Jesus to say of himself that he is from heaven, that his father is God. The only honourable way for this to be stated is by outsiders who come to "see" and say this about Jesus.

Holy Textures

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This is also why Jesus only talks openly with the inner group of his followers about where he is truly from - I am from the Father. Knowing this, and living it, is precisely what defines the inner group of Jesus' followers.

This withholding of truth from outsiders results in some interesting challenges and word play on Jesus' part. On the one hand, outsiders come to "see" Jesus and to see evidence of why they should change their estimation of his bottom-of-the-barrel social status (son of Joseph, the Nazarene carpenter), and on the other hand Jesus **HONOURABLY REFUSES** to be blatant about claiming any new worth for himself. And yet, he challenges them to ask themselves, "What have we seen? What is going on here? What is truly going on with this guy Jesus?"

Here's another way of thinking about this dance. The crowd comes and demands a sign. Jesus has two options:

1. If Jesus shows them a sign, he dishonours himself and proves that he is not worthy to be anyone special.
2. If Jesus refuses to show them a sign, he acts honourably and proves that he is worthy to be someone special, but maybe he really isn't anyone special because he has not shown them a sign that he is. (Except that when no one is demanding to see a sign as proof of his honour, Jesus does do signs, which then gets people wondering about his status and demanding that he do a sign to prove his status to them.)

What Jesus consistently does is choose option 2. Whenever he is challenged by outsiders to prove his worth, he instead challenges them to see for themselves. It is only to his insiders that he explicitly teaches them what they need to know in order to "see."

The text for today actually begins with a crowd who are following Jesus because "they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick." (John 6:2) Notice that this doesn't report a behaviour such as, "they saw Jesus healing the sick." Jesus is "doing" signs, and the crowds are "seeing" them.

We then have the story of the feeding of about 5,000 people with 5 barley loaves and 2 fish, at the end of which "the people saw the sign that he had done" and conclude that, "this is indeed the prophet who has come into the world." (John 6:14). To which Jesus responds by fleeing into the mountains (John 6:15)

According to John, it is this crowd that catches up with Jesus again on the other side of the lake. But now, instead of being ready to crown him, the "who are you really" dance begins again.

The question, "Rabbi, when did you come here?" is really a challenge to Jesus. Notice how it begins by lowering their previous estimation of Jesus as "the prophet," to "rabbi (teacher - of whom there were many in Jesus' day)." Even "rabbi" is a higher ranking than "peasant," but the question, "when did you come here," is actually not about, "tell us how was your boat ride." It is the ancient question of social location, "tell us who your father is, where were you born?"

Holy Textures

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As usual, Jesus does not answer the question directly. Instead, he begins by putting his personal reputation on the line, "I give you my word of honour" (or in the text, "Very truly, I tell you"). He then goes on to challenge them on the world of difference between what they were "**looking for**" and what they "**saw**:" food that perishes or food that endures for eternal life (6:26). Notice that in this interaction (verses 26-29), Jesus never refers to himself as being the Son of Man or the one whom the Father has sent.

The NRSV "believe in him who (God) has sent" (6:29) is too mild. The force of the language here is better translated as "believe into, embed yourself in, abide in, give your whole self in trust to, be in total solidarity with." Even though Jesus has honourably **NOT** said that **HE** is the one who God has sent, the crowd responds to Jesus' challenge to their not seeing what they were looking for, by again asking Jesus to give them a sign, and cite the precedence of Moses and the manna (bread) which appeared each day while the people wandered in the wilderness (Exodus 16).

Jesus then interprets the meaning of this passage to them. The lectionary passage ends with one of the great "I am" sayings found in John:

I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me (see comment above) shall never thirst.

(John 6:35)

However, a better ending for this exchange is verse 36:

But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe.

Needless to say, comments like that directly insult and challenge the crowds and authorities.

The challenge here for us is **NOT** that we see with our eyes and believe in IDEAS about Jesus.

The challenge here is to "**see**" which things perish and which things endure, and to embed ourselves - to abide in, to focus our living on - the things that endure. Because only the things that endure truly satisfy, and only the things that endure bring true life.

If we cannot "see" anything that endures, then we had better eat, drink and be merry to the max for tomorrow we die. But if we can truly open our inner eyes to "see" what endures, then we had better align our eating, drinking and merriment with what truly lasts and satisfies.

Holy Textures

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And the questions which both Jesus and John leave for us to answer for ourselves are:

- What are we looking for?
- What have we seen in Jesus?

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* [Link to Amazon.com Bibliography for Bruce Malina, et. al.](#), Social Science Commentary on ... The Synoptic Gospels; The Gospel of John; The Book of Acts; The Letters of Paul; The Book of Revelation; and others.