

Bread of Life

A number of summers ago, I decided that our porch really needed a hummingbird feeder. So, I selected an attractive blown-glass one; it had an interesting design with just one place for the hummingbirds to feed.

I never saw a single bird.

Additionally, the thing leaked sugar water onto the porch and ants would travel from miles around to scale the walls for this abundant supply of food.

So, when spring rolled around again the next year it seemed reasonable to forego the ant magnet/hummingbird feeder. A few weeks later, though, I was enjoying my breakfast when I looked out the window and noticed a single hummingbird hovering on the porch, looking at me accusingly with betrayed eyes. I went that day to the hardware and bought the traditional feeder with the round perch and the four yellow plastic flowers from which the birds might slurp nectar. Soon after, I saw the hummingbird back – I'm guessing she's a female because she's black and white, though I'm not a bird watcher and I haven't a clue.

Not too long after that, though, I spotted another couple of birds frequenting the feeder and I felt like the Mackenzie Scott of the bird world. The porch was now a destination for hummingbirds and I was dispensing food with largesse.

You can imagine my horror when before my own eyes the black and white bird dive-bombed the others, running them away from the feeder.

"Bad day," I thought. "Well, perhaps she's supporting a family, it's July after all."

But then over the course of the next few days, I began to notice a pattern: every time the smaller birds would pause at the feeder, the larger bird would swoop in for the attack. My porch had become the battleground of an all-out bird-turf rumble.

How disillusioning! I just wanted some birds to watch with my coffee, and I had the sharks and the jets of the hummingbird world competing to establish dominance over our porch, not realizing that in the cabinet over the refrigerator, there was the mother lode of hummingbird food in a plastic zip-loc bag.

They don't know that there's enough.

I got to thinking, though, about how much energy that black and white bird is expending on guarding the food. It must be exhausting to worry that some other bird is going to jeopardize the supply. There's always been food in the feeder when she's come, and yet, I can't help but realize that the real problem is *she wants it all*.

I do realize that this is the animal kingdom, but it in an odd sort of way does make me think of the story about King David we read this morning.

David's kingship is the soap opera of the Old Testament, and he looks better or worse depending on who is telling the story. The cycle of David's sin and decline is rather lengthy and complicated, so let me see if I can streamline it a bit. You might want to cover your children's ears, though. The Bible can be an adult book at times.

David, by now the king, went out for a walk one night on his porch overlooking the city and spied Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite bathing on her rooftop, though "peeping" might be a better word for it. Frederick Buechner says David remembered that first glimpse of her, years later in his dotage, like she was a peeled pear.¹

David lingered, leering at her, and that lingering leering became tragic. She consumed his thoughts. He had to have her. Drunk on power, what the king wants, the king gets, and the king wants it all.

She becomes pregnant and David is terrified that his folly will bring down his kingdom. To cover his tracks, he brings her husband in from the battlefield to trick him into spending the night in his own bed so David's guilt will be covered. Uriah, though, refuses to enjoy the comforts of home while his men are on the battlefield. David tries again, this time getting Uriah liquored up and sending him home. Uriah still exhibits more self-control than the king. Finally, David sent a letter back to his commanders by Uriah's own hand ordering that in the heat of battle, all the forces should retreat, leaving Uriah to be struck down.

It works.

Our reading this morning picks up after the murder of Uriah the Hittite, with the prophet Nathan coming to the king to speak the truth to power. "You had everything you could possibly need, wealth upon wealth, and you wanted more," Nathan said to the king in story form, "You had everything, and you took what little another had from him and vandalized it. What do you think of such a person?"

Laying out a parable of right and wrong, the prophet spoke to the king and confronted the problems of his sin.

David, not recognizing himself in the story, only recognizing the injustice of it all intones the verdict: One who would do such a thing deserves death.

Nathan strikes: "YOU are the man." You have sinned and there will be consequences.

David confesses his sin.

¹ Buechner, Frederick. Peculiar Treasures: A Biblical Who's Who. (HarperOne, San Francisco, 1979) p17

God relents. God does not promise to spare David from direct consequences, but neither does God pile on. God will stand by David.

But unlike the hummingbird world where birds can flit and joust and find another feeder, the consequences of David's greed and self-serving behavior are real and severe. I won't go into further detail but he very nearly loses it all.

Which brings us around to sin.

We vastly underestimate sin in the way we talk about it. We're fascinated, sometimes morbidly, with behavior – symptoms – while neglecting the root cause: The condition. David's story highlights well the reality that it is the *condition* that leads to the *symptom*, not the other way around.

Our self-destructive clinging to sin matters to God.

It matters to God if we seek wealth on wealth, and I'm not talking about hummingbirds here, while neglecting those whose needs are not being met due to our own abundance.

It matters to God if we lie and deceive in order to cover our own failures.

No wonder then, that sin is classically understood as separation from God and from each other. How can humankind truly be in communion one another like this?

We have a solid history of hiding sin.

Ever since Genesis we try to cover it up, in the case of the first sinners, quite literally.

And ever since Genesis, God has been seeking to make it right. The Hebrew Scriptures are the story of God intervening to make it right.

That is the best, truest definition of judgment in the Old Testament sense that I've ever heard, that *the judge is the one who comes to make things right*.

God, the injured party, acts to make it right.

That's what the good judge does: make things *right*.

The Bible projects a vision of a world floating on such generosity that we only need to rely upon the living God, the holy one of Israel and lay aside our need to grasp for more, to crush the competition and secure our future.

It's almost otherworldly, this vision, because it's a vision of creation the way God wants it to be. It is creation relying on the goodness of the creator, living together in communion.

That's what Jesus is trying to get at in the story we read this morning, and it is the opposite of the David narrative and the narrative in which we are tempted to live most of our lives.

John loves to tell the Gospel story in sweeping narrative – nothing is ever short in John – and he follows up on the feeding of the five thousand with this story we read today, with the crowd

getting in the boat and chasing Jesus and the disciples. It's *grand theft boat* in the first century – and when they finally catch up with him, Jesus turns to them and says, "I know you're only here because of the bread!"

Well, that's a paraphrase, actually. It's more like a sermon. They've come seeking a sign, and instead Jesus gives them a sermon on the bread of life. Jesus does that a lot in John, you ask for a sign and you get a sermon instead.

But with *this* crowd, they seem to want *more*. They *want* to know what it is to do the work of God. Jesus goes on: *I am the bread of life*, he says. I am all you need.

It is a vision of redemption, of life lived fully and wholly. It is, yet again, the message that God has been trying to get across from Genesis to the Gospel to now: God is all we need.

The claims of the Gospel on our lives, the claims that come along with being God's chosen, they reflect a task that is both a *blessing* and a *challenge*.

But it's so seductive to trust things instead of God.

That's why it doesn't do to make an idol out of anything, including even our own teachings.

That's why the followers of Jesus in God alone.

We don't have faith in a *doctrine* of the church. We don't have faith in our *own* ability to avoid sin to carry the day.

No, we have faith in a *person* who gave himself for us, and wants to give himself for us – the very antithesis of the 'me-first' mentality of hummingbird turf wars and Davidic drama and the rat race to get ahead.

I am the bread of life, Jesus says, inviting us to trust in something lasting and reliable. He is inviting us to trust God's goodness.

I am mightily aware of the competing claims for the message of the Gospel.

Some make the gospel a transaction, do this, and avoid hell.

Some peddle a prosperity Gospel: pray this and God will prosper you.

Some would rob the Gospel of any message by reducing it to psychology and sociology: these behaviors exhibit this anxiety and Jesus is the cure.

To all of these competing claims, Jesus says, 'I am the bread of life.'

I am the bread of life is a call to God as God is known:

The God who walked with them in the desert, who chastened them through prophets when their attention was turned away from the least among them.

I am the bread of life is a call to remember that, when God has given us everything, that we cannot hoard God's abundance and think we are living the Gospel.

I am the bread of life is an invitation to live our lives trusting Jesus.

Trusting in Jesus is living into the promise that, like God with David, Jesus will always be there with those who trust him.

Fred Craddock tells a story about teaching a preaching workshop with a Catholic priest after the Second Vatican Council, when enormous changes had been made in worship and theology. Father Gene Monihan, Craddock remembers, addressed the body in simple attire and said,

“I am fifty-four years old. I have spent most of my adult life with my back turned toward the congregation as I ministered to the altar. Now my church says I must turn around and face the people. I have spent most of my life hiding behind incense pots and candles, doing my work as a clergyman, and now the church says, ‘come out and be with the people.’ I have spent most of my life saying the mass in Latin and now the church says, ‘speak English so the people will understand,’ and on and on he went, describing the changes. When he came to the end, he said to the priests that were gathered, ‘As you can see, I’ve been stripped of almost everything. All I have left is God.’²

I am the bread of life, says Jesus.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.

² Craddock, Fred. Craddock Stories. Mike Graves and Richard F. Ward, Eds. Chalice Press, St. Louis, 2001. P64