

## A Dad and a Daughter Do a Dialogue<sup>1</sup>

### DAUGHTER: TODAY'S GOSPEL TEXT

Jesus said to [the crowd,] “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”

Then the Jews began to complain about him because he said, “I am the bread that came down from heaven.” They were saying, “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’?” Jesus answered them, “Do not complain among yourselves. No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me; and I will raise that person up on the last day. It is written in the prophets, ‘And they shall all be taught by God.’ Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me. Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father.

“Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”  
– John 6:35, 41-51

### DAD:

Kim, I have a confession to make this evening/morning. It is a confession you have seen me make before, in writing. But now I think that I must share my confession with the rest of your congregation. It is this: I don't much like the Gospel of John. It's my least favorite of the four Gospels. When I preach on a Sunday that has a Gospel reading from John, I often wish that I could ignore and avoid it. You may have noticed that in my homily last Sunday, only the opening paragraph was connected directly to the Gospel text from John. During this month of August, when I'm subbing here for your pastor, four of the five Gospel readings are from John. *Uffda*, as your Norwegian-American mother – and my wife – would say.

So why am I put off by this Gospel, a Gospel that over the centuries has been the favorite of so many Christians – including Martin Luther? As it happens, I have two main objections to the Fourth Gospel. *First*, it seems to me – as it has seemed to many modern biblical scholars for some time now – that the Johannine community producing this Gospel was somewhat arrogant. They had what the scholars call a “high Christology.” In other words, they were ready and willing to assert more elevated claims about Jesus as the Christ than the communities, for example, that produced the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. And they seemed to be quite smug about it. It's not

their high Christology that I object to, though I do think that it must be re-interpreted and re-contextualized for today's world. It's their smugness – their subtle sense of superiority about it all – that puts me off.

*Second*, and as I hinted in the homily last week, the Fourth Gospel lends itself to privatized interpretations – to understandings and practices of Christian faith and life that are overly personal and insufficiently public, overly other-worldly and insufficiently this-worldly. In my better moments, I admit to the necessity for a vibrant personal faith and for a personal hope that extends beyond the horizon of death and the grave. But in my worse moments – and I have quite a few of those – I think that this emphasis on the personal dimension can and sometimes does lead to what I call spiritual navel-gazing, to a faith nearly devoid of a social or community dimension. When this happens, I am convinced that Christianity becomes distorted.

Now that I've said all of this, perhaps it turns out that I'm as smug – with as much of a superiority complex – as the people, the perspective, and the writing about which I'm complaining. So help me out, Kim. What shall I do? Perhaps you could begin by telling me how you respond to the Gospel of John in general and to today's Gospel reading in particular.

DAUGHTER:

You know, I didn't know I had any specific “issues” with John until I started researching my answer to your question. I always thought I loved the beginning of John – “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God . . .” and then there's that part about the word becoming flesh. Well, it's actually a couple of paragraphs away; in between John describes light and dark and testifying and being and knowing and believing. It kind of hurts my brain to try figure out that middle part.

This passage from John 6 also hurts my brain. I'm not sure what to make of never being hungry or thirsty, eternal life, eating living bread and bread that is flesh. My left-brain logic tells me that there will be days when I'm going to be hungry and thirsty and eventually I will die, whether I figure out this living bread stuff in the meantime. My right-brain says, oh cool, a metaphor, but then still gets lost in trying to translate what that metaphor means for life on planet earth.

I read in Shane Hipps' *The Hidden Power of Electronic Media* that “Luther offered an evaluation of the New Testament Canon. In a section called ‘Which are the true and noblest books of the New Testament?’ Luther writes, ‘John's gospel is the one, fine, true and chief gospel, and is far, far to be preferred over the other three and placed high above them.’”

Shane says that Luther's reasoning was simple – “anything in Scripture that tells the story of Jesus was far less helpful than books describing explicit doctrines about Jesus. It should not be surprising that Luther, who was shaped by the technology of print, would venerate the more abstract and literate treatises in Scripture. The Gospel of John and Paul's writings, while certainly containing story and metaphor, are primarily characterized by highly theological, abstract, and lengthy propositional discourses, whereas the synoptic Gospels are characterized by short, rhythmic blocks of concrete stories and parables rooted in the thought patterns of an oral tradition.”

So that's my issue with John. In a nutshell, the abstract theological concepts in John hurt my brain.

DAD:

We both seem to have some strong reservations about the Gospel of John in general and today's gospel text in particular. Let me try to sort this out a bit further.

*First*, today's gospel text has some clear relation to the sacrament of holy communion – clear at any rate to me, though not to every New Testament scholar. If I am correct, Kim, then you should *expect* to have a headache, a lingering and at times intense migraine. Sacraments are, by definition, mysteries: that's the root meaning of the term. Mysteries are not puzzles to be solved or mazes to be figured out. Sacraments or mysteries are gifts to be experienced, labyrinths to be explored over a lifetime – where one is almost always lost by human reckoning, but always found by God's. The migraine recedes when we relax in the mystery; it intensifies when we regard the mystery as one problem among many that need resolution.

This helps me to deal with our gospel reading. For all of their pride in their “high” Christology, in their ability to articulate the faith in the noblest language and with the most profound concepts available to them in their day, the Johannine community did not lose this sense of mystery, this realization that there is more to God and Christ than we can ever hope to perceive or parse. I need that reminder, even – perhaps especially – as a theologian.

*Second*, I find Shane Hipps' distinction between the propositional and abstract character of John and Paul, on the one hand, and the story and metaphor orientation of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, on the other, to be spot on. For roughly the first four decades of my sentient life, I reveled in abstractions and concepts and doctrines. But in the past quarter of a century, I have been drawn more and more to stories and parables and metaphors – to Christianity primarily as a way to be lived out rather than principally as a set of beliefs to be figured out. I'm still not fully converted: I still enjoy trying

to sort out thoughts and put ideas together. Perhaps a balance between the two approaches is the best that I – or any of us – can muster. But whatever the preference, whatever the orientation, the focus needs to be on God, on God’s Son, and on God’s people – which means all people. The Jesus of history invites discipleship. The Christ of faith invites deliberation. But they are one reality, not two: we are invited to be disciples who deliberate, wanderers in the labyrinth called life who wonder out loud, followers of a Rabbi who can tolerate doubt and differences and dissent.

Does this help, Kim? Or is it just more theobabble, coming from a fellow who played a role in your migraine by having contributed to the DNA that seems to express itself in your reluctance to live with loose ends – loose ends in your life in the world and in the life of your mind?

DAUGHTER:

I recently read a blog post titled “God is a mystery, not an explanation.” The author of the blog, James McGrath, Associate Professor of Religion at Butler University, writes:

To say “God did it” is not an explanation. To suggest that an omnipresent, omnipotent, omniscient being is somehow self-explanatory and a way to eliminate mystery is misguided. This doesn’t mean that it is inappropriate to talk about God when talking about these mysteries. But God is part of the mystery, and to speak of God is to affirm that beyond these tangible mysteries we perceive there are even greater mysteries regarding which we may not even yet be asking the right questions.

I see this tension of mystery revealed and explanation sought in the gospel reading. If we back up to the beginning of John 6, we learn that some of the crowd of 5,000 that Jesus fed with 5 loaves and 2 fish has followed Jesus across a lake. They have a few questions: they want to understand Jesus, they want to have faith and they want more proof. But according to Jesus’ response, they are asking the wrong questions.

In these 2 days, you think we’d be reading about Jesus’ following grow exponentially. Instead, because Jesus doesn’t offer the easy answers, we read in John 6:60 that his disciples said “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?” Not only that, but in John 6:66, because of Jesus’ words, “many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him.”

So then Jesus asked the twelve, “Do you also wish to go away?”

I find that this is the very question that taunts me every day I choose to follow Jesus. Actually, to me it sounds more like The Clash singing in my head:

Should I stay or should I go now?  
If I stay there will be trouble,  
and if I go it will be double.  
So come on and let me know,  
should I stay or should I go?

Except that no one else is going to let me know what to choose. I've got to make that choice on my own with loose ends, unsolved mysteries, and abstract theological concepts hurting my brain.

Today, I want to respond as Peter did – “Lord to whom shall we go, you have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.” Amen.

DAD:

Let us pray:

*Sovereign Lord: we know that we cannot penetrate your mystery, but that you have penetrated us with a revealing yet still mysterious presence through your Son. Thank you for his incarnation into our world and for his ongoing presence with us through your Word, through your Sacraments, and through your people. Help us to realize, like Peter, that we need to go nowhere else for your truth and life. Amen.*

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<sup>1</sup> Presented by Tom Wilkens and Kim Wilkens at Peace Lutheran Church in Charlottesville, VA, on 08/08/09 and 08/09/09.