

## **A Storytelling Commentary on John 6:35-51**

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Once again the authors of a lectionary have elected to leave out a significant part of the discourse in John six, in part because it's very long and there are ways in which what is established in 36-40 is a motif that is picked up later in this discourse. However, I think that John is very wise in what he was doing, so I have included verses 41-51 and recommend that you also tell the whole of this section. The reason is that the motif of Jesus being the bread from heaven that gives eternal life frames the section that deals with the puzzle of Jesus' identity and his being a human being whose father and mother are known by his fellow Galileans. That frame gives both more emphasis to this theme but it also establishes more intimacy with Jesus as a person.

The basic motif that is established here is the connection between heaven and earth—the real world versus the bread that came down from heaven. The fundamental puzzle in this section is the question asked by the Jews who were saying, "Isn't this Jesus the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How is it that he says, 'I've come down from heaven'?" They are raising the foundational mystery in the feeding of the 5000, the walking on the water, and of Jesus' words throughout this section.

One of the new elements that is introduced in this section is that Jesus says no one can come to me unless they are drawn by my Father and also everyone that the Father gives to me will come and anyone who comes to me, I will never drive away. This motif of the sorting of John's audience by those who have been drawn to Jesus is, on the one hand, a factual description: those who are drawn to Jesus and the telling of this story are those who will stick around to hear the whole gospel story and who may come to believe that Jesus is the one whom God has sent.

But it is also the case that what John here describes, namely that no one can come unless drawn by the Father, is experientially true. Only those who are drawn to Jesus as a character in the telling of this story are those who can come. That mystery of being drawn to the character of Jesus is one of the foundational mysteries of the telling of the story and of the Gospel. It is a description of the dynamics of distance between the listeners and the storyteller as he or she presents Jesus. It describes the dynamics of distance: some people are drawn to him and others are not. According to John, being drawn to Jesus comes from God.

The motif that Jesus establishes—he is the one who has seen God, the one who has come down from heaven—is a further development of a theme that was established in the prologue. No one has seen God except the only Son who is in the bosom of the Father. He has made him known. The motif of Jesus making God known through his actions, through his words, through his very presence, is at the core of the meaning of John's Gospel. What Jesus does as the son of God, as the prophet whom God has sent, is to give

his life for the life of the world. The bread of life that Jesus gives is eternal life. It is life in the Spirit that has no end and is not determined by the dynamics of the flesh or by the death of the flesh. It is determined by Jesus' power.

The promise in this section of the bread of life discourse is that Jesus will raise up those who have died on the last day and that they will then be present for eternal life. Eternal life is thereby directly related to the resurrection of the dead. You can hear in this speech the clues about what is to happen. This speech ends with "the bread I will give is my flesh." It is the third prophecy of Jesus' passion and death. The first was in the Temple and the second in his speech to Nicodemus: "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness so also must the Son of Man be lifted up." Being "lifted up" means being lifted up on the cross, as well as being lifted up to heaven.

This passion prophecy is set in the context of the prophecies of the resurrection, but in this instance it is the resurrection of those who believe in him, not Jesus' own resurrection. So the bread of life is intimately associated with Jesus' gift of life—life eternal. In the telling of this story, I would recommend that you explore the character of Jesus and how he says these words. These are words that are very intimate. They are very loving words. They are words full of promise and hope for those who hear. Finding a way to give those words of Jesus presence is a way of becoming an agent of the story in which Jesus becomes present.