

THE HOPE JOURNAL

LEARNING TO LOVE, TOGETHER

August 18, 2024



MISUNDERSTAND

the game of not getting it

by Drew Downs

This week, we are offered another example of people looking to *get* Jesus. Both *get* him in the sense of understand him and also *get* him as to catch him in the act. I don't think these are mutually exclusive ideas.

We see this all the time in politics, when we both *want* to understand someone and also want to defeat them. We also see this in academics, work, and many social situations. We like "winning" as much as understanding.

The eagerness to push back, even to the point of mockery, *rather* than understand or even *try* to understand reflects our own egos and fears far more than our strength.

It also demonstrates a fundamental misunderstanding of our purpose as followers of Jesus. Ours is not to win. It is to serve. To love. To share. We listen, seek to understand, and make ourselves vulnerable. We open ourselves up to actually get Jesus.

ORDINARY TIME

2024

WHAT'S GOING ON

*"You know we've got to find a way
To bring some loving here today".*

-Marvin Gaye

Disciples, Apostles, and Saints!

Performative Misunderstanding

Two weeks ago, the Olympics kicked off as they often do, with great theatrics, creativity, and people judging the creative decisions of others. I've grown weary of such judgment because I'm pretty sure I couldn't pull off an opening ceremony myself. Maybe you can. If so, I bet they can use you in Los Angeles right about now!

This time we had a bit of performative misunderstanding when a representation of a bacchanalian feast meant to honor the Olympics' Greek heritage was taken as a mockery of the Last Supper. Which, if we're being honest *couldn't* be mockery since the tea-totalers of the time thought Jesus was a drunkard. More likely, however, is that some people considered the potential presence of someone dressed in drag at the Lord's Table is the true source of mockery. To make that that true requires a real jump in logic that most people I suspect would not grant.

The lectionary offered us a brilliant counterpoint (naturally) in both the Feeding of the Multitudes and in the performative misunderstanding of Jesus's critics. But if I had preached that Sunday, I might have invited us to read from *Mark's* version of the feeding story. That it was *the disciples* who found themselves fearful and missing the point. It says: "And they were utterly astounded, for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened."

Even the most devoted to Jesus can misunderstand what it is we're being fed by him: the Bread of Life. Which looks like hope, love, and joy. Judgment that doesn't yield these three probably misunderstands about the loaves.

With love,
Drew

ORDINARY TIME

2024

FOR SUNDAY

Proper 15B

August 18, 2024

Collect

Almighty God, you have given your only Son to be for us a sacrifice for sin, and also an example of godly life: Give us grace to receive thankfully the fruits of his redeeming work, and to follow daily in the blessed steps of his most holy life; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

Amen.

Reading

John 6:51-58

Jesus said, "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."

The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" So Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever."

ORDINARY TIME

Reflection

Jesus loves playing with expectations. In every way. He loves to play (intellectually, mischievously, hopefully, encouragingly) for himself and those he is teaching. He zags when everyone else zigs.

He also never lets literalism stand. This seems to be important to him.

Here he is, talking about his purpose in the world—how God has brought him into the people's midst to show them the way—and he offers an affirming, attractive, life-giving image to them: "I am the bread of life!" and the response of some faith leaders is essentially, *how is this guy bread? LOL.*

But their response displays a more insidious character than that. They don't take him literally about the bread part, but the eating part. Their actual words are "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" which shows that they understand that Jesus *isn't* bread. But they are stuck on the purpose of such a physical image. They don't have enough imagination to play with words, to listen deeply, or to dream of something different. They hear bread and they get literal about *one part of the idea.*

They don't get what Jesus intends. They don't understand him, let alone what he has come to do and be. Not because they don't get metaphors or take everything literally. But because they take part of it literally and miss the bigger picture Jesus is sharing.

Jesus doesn't just use a metaphor to describe a metaphysical relationship. He's also using this *material* image to name the *material* character of the *Missio Dei*. Which means our expectations for metaphors can lead us to misunderstand Jesus today. That Jesus doesn't just feed our souls. His purpose is to transform the world into one in which people are fed with literal bread. So we all are fed.

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