

The Bread of Life (3)



John 6:51-59
Year B Proper 15

copyright © 2014
Freeman Ng
www.AuthorFreeman.com

Parts by scene

■ = large part ▲ = medium sized part ● = small part

| | | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| ▲ | Matthew - a former tax collector (i.e. a agent of the Roman occupation of his own people) who in his repentance from that past life is the most religiously fervent of the disciples | ● | | ▲ | | |
| ▲ | John - the gentlest and most caring of the disciples | ▲ | | ▲ | | |
| ▲ | Synagogue Leader - the well-meaning leader of the synagogue | ▲ | | ▲ | | |
| ● | Woman - a wealthy and skeptical member of the synagogue | ● | | ● | | |
| ▲ | Priest - one of the priests of the synagogue | ● | | ▲ | | |
| ▲ | James - the most officious disciple, often the most frustrated with Jesus' unconventional decisions (such as his allowing women to join the group) | | ▲ | | | ▲ |
| ▲ | Judas - possibly the deepest thinker and best organizer, the one who usually sees the big picture most clearly, and also the disciple with the best sense of humor | | ▲ | | | ● |
| ● | Thomas - the skeptic, who really wants to believe because of his emotional bond with the others, but can't simply ignore his doubts | | ● | | | |
| ▲ | Joanna - a wealthy woman with a perceptive and agile intellect who abandons her life as the co-manager of King Herod's household to follow Jesus | | | | ■ | |
| ▲ | Andrew - the younger brother of Peter, one of the youngest disciples | | | | ▲ | |
| ● | Peter - the most headstrong disciple, and the least afraid of a fight, but never the smartest person in the room | | | | ▲ | |

Scene 1

John , Leader , Matthew , Priest , Woman

{After Jesus' sermon at the synagogue, John and Matthew wait to meet with the synagogue leader.}

Matthew I don't understand why you asked me to join you. Shouldn't it be Judas or James?

John Judas said he had some thinking to do.

Matthew What about James?

John Judas suggested asking you first.

Matthew Me? Really? I'm honored, but...

John I think it makes sense. They want to talk to us about the content of the rabbi's sermon, and there's nobody who thinks more deeply about them than you.

Matthew Okay. I'll do my best.

{The synagogue leader enters along with the priest and the woman.}

Leader Thanks for seeing us. As you know, we originally booked your rabbi for three days of talks here, but...a question has arisen about whether we should go ahead with them.

Woman *[argumentatively]* There's no "question" about it!

Leader *[ignoring her]* This is my associate, one of the other priests of the synagogue.

Priest *[all business]* Pleased to meet you.

John My name's John and this is Matthew. *[to the woman]* And you are...?

{A brief pause.}

Leader *[jumping in]* She's one of our...benefactors.

Woman *[firmly]* Their *biggest* "benefactor."

Matthew *[with understanding]* Ah!

Leader We have some concerns over the sermon your rabbi preached today.

John We'll be happy to answer any questions you might have. Is there anything in particular you'd like to discuss?

Priest I have a list right here.

Matthew Ah.

Priest He said at one point that he was "the living bread that came down from heaven."

Matthew That's a reference to the manna that our ancestors were fed on their journey from Egypt.

John And he's using it figuratively, of course. He's saying that his teachings come from heaven, and that they will feed us spiritually.

Woman *[argumentatively]* Spiritual nothing! *[to the priest]* Get to the good stuff! *[to John and Matthew]* He also said "this bread is my flesh." What about that? What kind of horrible cannibalistic cult are you?

Leader You can see why this is puzzling to us. He didn't say his teaching was the manna. He didn't say he'd feed us *with* the manna. He said *he was* the manna. More than that: his *flesh* was the manna. I understand that the manna is figurative, but is "flesh" also figurative?

Scene 2

James , Judas , Thomas

{Meanwhile, some other disciples also discuss the day's events.}

James *[angrily]* You let them meet with the synagogue guy without me?

Judas *[snapping out of distracted state]* What? Oh, yeah. Sorry.

James And you sent Matthew instead? What were you thinking?

Thomas What's wrong with Matthew?

James For one thing, he's not one of the leaders of this group. For another thing, he's a worse wimp than...

Thomas John?

James All right! He's my brother, but let's face it: neither of them is going to fight very hard for a second sermon tomorrow.

Judas *[mildly]* I'm not even sure we should want it. That's why I didn't send you.

Thomas *[genuinely curious]* Not want it? Why not?

Judas Well, it didn't go very well today, did it?

James *[the wind out of his sail]* No. I guess it didn't.

Thomas *[optimistically]* We upset some people, but we've done that before, haven't we?

Judas I have no problem with upsetting people with our mission. But today, the rabbi upset people in ways that had nothing to do with the mission. *[to James]* Did you even understand a word he said?

James *[grudgingly]* Well...no.

Judas It was all pseudo spiritual gobbledygook as far as I could tell. *Not* the kind of talk that inspires confidence. I don't think our mission is to become one of those cults that goes out into the desert and commits mass suicide!

Thomas *[encouragingly]* Come on! It's not that bad.

Judas *[wearily]* I know, I know. But it's not good. So I'm not sure it really matters whether we're able to go back tomorrow. It might just make things worse.

James I guess you're right. But keep me in the loop next time! Alright?

Scene 3

John , Leader , Matthew , Priest , Woman

{Back at the meeting with the synagogue leaders.}

Priest Item four: "Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood will live forever."

Woman Cannibalism! Just like I said.

John No, no. It's meant spiritually.

Leader What does it mean, even spiritually, to eat someone's flesh and drink his blood?

Matthew It's to partake of his essence. To thoroughly digest his teachings.

Leader That runs me into the same difficulty as before. If that was what he meant, it wasn't a very good metaphor. Could this just be a poorly composed sermon?

John I don't think that can be the case. The rabbi...is always very sure of what he says.

Priest [*firmly*] If he's saying what he means, then I don't see how it can be acceptable. I can't believe he's talking about cannibalism, and any other possibilities border on blasphemy!

Woman Either way, he has to go!

John Let me see if I can try another way of explaining it. The rabbi says that he *is* the bread and drink, and I'll be honest, I don't know exactly what that means, but what I *can* say is this: that's what it feels like. As a follower of his, I don't feel like I'm a student sitting at the feet of a teacher, or patient being healed by a doctor. I feel like starving man being given food. A man in the desert discovering a well. And he is the food and the water, not anything he does or says. I know it doesn't make sense, but it's how I feel.

Leader I guess I can see that. But what about "living forever"?

Matthew I can say something about that. To be honest, all this food talk doesn't do much for me. If the rabbi had preached his sermon just to me, he might have called himself money instead of food. I used to be pretty well off -- maybe even better off than you, ma'am -- and in those days, the flow of money felt very much like my life blood. It wasn't what enabled my life; it *was* my life. But there was something...insufficient about it. I felt that, too. All the time. There was something thin, something limited about it. Maybe it would last my whole life, maybe it would even last forever, but it wasn't *eternal*.

Priest [*scornfully*] "Eternal" *means* "lasts forever!"

Matthew No it doesn't! "Lasts forever" is only about duration. "Eternal" is about quality. My money might have lasted me forever, but it still wouldn't have been eternal. I might quit the rabbi tomorrow, but

the life he was in me would still have been eternal.

Woman *[a little shaken]* That's...that's ridiculous.

{Then there's a long pause.}

Leader *[clearing his throat]* I think we had one more question, right?

Priest Yes. He said he would raise the people up on the last day. We assume he was talking about the day of the resurrection, when all the dead will be raised. If so, was he claiming he would be the power behind that event?

Leader *[warningly]* Because then he would be claiming to be God!

John Um...I don't know what he meant by it.

Matthew Maybe he was talking about the Day of the Lord.

Woman *[genuinely curious now]* In that case, he would be claiming to be the Messiah! Is that what he's claiming?

Priest In which case, there would also be grounds to stone him!

John Uh...

Scene 4

Andrew , Joanna , Peter

{Meanwhile, a couple of other disciples discuss the meeting.}

Joanna I hope they're being careful what they say.

Andrew I don't know, the synagogue leader seemed pretty fair minded to me.

Peter Yeah, but I don't like the look of the other priest. I think he's going to be the bad cop to the synagogue leader's good cop.

Joanna I'm more worried about that woman.

Andrew You know her?

Joanna I think so. If she's who I think she is, then *she's* basically the synagogue leader.

- Peter** How can that be? She's just a woman. *[in a suddenly apologetic voice to Joanna]* Uh, sorry.
- Joanna** She's their biggest donor. Also, she has tons of connections in both the priesthood and the government. And half the merchants in Capernaum are in her clique. There are all kinds of ways to wield power, even if you're a woman. Believe me, I know.
- Andrew** But you wielded it for good in your day. At least from what I've heard. What they say is that Herod would have been twice as bad if you hadn't been steward of his house.
- Joanna** Well, this woman wields her power for good, too, although she and I might disagree on the definition from time to time. She works pretty hard for the good of the city. Still, I can understand why she might want us out. The rabbi's sermon *was* pretty strange, don't you think?
- Peter** I liked it! I didn't totally understand it, but I liked it.
- Andrew** It was pretty different from his usual sermons - even though some of *them* are pretty strange, too!
- Joanna** How would you describe the difference?
- Andrew** Well...this one was way more repetitious. Most of his sermons, even the strange ones, move from a beginning to an end. They have a structure, a logic to them, even if we can't figure it out entirely. But in this one, he just kept repeating certain phrases over and over. I kept waiting for him to explain what he meant by him being the living bread and drink, but instead, he'd just say it over again in a slightly different way. It was almost...well, almost a little creepy.
- Joanna** In my days in Jerusalem, we had a group that used to invite interesting people to give talks at our dinner parties. That's how I first met all of you. Sometimes, we'd make a mistake in judging someone and end up with a religious zealot or a political radical spouting jargon at us for an hour. I have to say: today kind of felt like that.
- Peter** *[incredulously]* Guys! What are you saying?
- Joanna** *[with a reassuring laugh]* Don't worry! We're not jumping ship or anything like that. We're just trying to figure out what the rabbi's doing this time. I guess it's been a pretty wild ride up until now, so

we might as well hang on for dear life and see where it takes us!

Scene 5

James , Judas

{James speaks with Judas after the meeting is over.}

James *[victoriously]* Yes!

Judas Huh?

James We won! They're going to let us come back and speak again tomorrow.

Judas *[in mild surprise]* Really! *[carefully]* Well...okay.

James John and Matthew pulled it off! I guess you made the right call.

Judas *[still carefully neutral]* I guess.

James *[magnanimously]* And you know what? If I had been there, maybe it *wouldn't* have worked out. I would have gone in with sword drawn, and that might have put them on the defensive, and they never would have budged an inch. Maybe John and Matthew were the perfect ones to send.

Judas Maybe. Assuming our goal was to speak again tomorrow.

James Oh yeah. You're not sure about that. *[cheerfully]* Well, cheer up! We won, and the rabbi's going to get a chance to finish his sermon. Don't forget: they cut him off today. Maybe what he was going to say next was going to make everything right.

Judas Maybe.

James *[continuing in his expansive mood]* And you know what else? You were right about the food, and I was wrong. It did go over really well with the crowd. We should do it again tomorrow!

Judas Um, okay. Sure.

James Great! It's settled, then. We'll feed the hungry flock again, and then the rabbi will finish his sermon, and everything will come out right! You'll see!

Judas I hope I do.

*You can read my thoughts about this play and respond with your own at
www.WineskinProject.net/blog/bread3*

Copyright © 2014 by Freeman Ng and the Wineskin Project

Freeman Ng is a writer, poet, and Google software engineer living in Oakland, California. He's also the author of:

- *Joan* - a novelization of the life of Joan of Arc
- *Who Am I?* - a personalizable picture book
- **Haiku Diem** - a daily haiku feed that's been going since July, 2010

www.AuthorFreeman.com