### **Homily for August 11, 2024 John 6:35, 41-51 “The Bread of Life”**

### *Jesus said, “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.”*

A lot of centuries have gone by, and a text like this hardly raises an eyebrow anymore, we are so used to the image; Jesus, the bread of heaven; Jesus, the bread of life. Eat his flesh, drink his blood, we understand the symbolism; even non-church folk usually get that much of our message. But it has not always been the case, not remotely; myriad peoples were tortured and died horrible deaths because of these ‘bread-of-life’ texts from the Gospel of John. Early Christianity was nearly extinguished by Nero, Domitian, and a host of other Roman emperors on the basis of their disgust for us, those early Christ followers whose queasy rituals featured something pretty close to cannibalism, that’s what the Romans thought. Now, the Greeks, who would have been quite comfortable with the allegorical side of things, would have had no quibble, would have understood that surely these worshippers were serving symbolic meals. But as so often happens with conquering cultures, the Romans were not too fond of allegory, were a much more literal lot, and to them, this eating flesh and drinking blood was too much, which is saying quite a bit in view of Roman history. Serious efforts were made to end our fledgling faith on the basis of distrust and disgust, never a good combo when you are the new kid on the block. Nevertheless, over the centuries we have sorted it all out, and now nobody thinks we have secret blood ceremonies anymore, which is good, right?

What is not so good is that a lot of meaningful stuff gets swept aside when we spend centuries sorting out the minutia. The big picture definitely suffers, and for us Christians, especially Wesleyan Christians, the big picture is always about grace, about how God’s love and care interface with our hard-hearted world. And so, there is one sentence in this text that I want to focus on this morning, a sentence that has confused me for a long time, but not now. Now I understand, and I want you to understand, too…but before we can talk about that, I need to chat you up about augers and gimlets.

An auger is an incredibly useful tool – you probably use several every day. You have hundreds of them in your home, I’m sure. An auger is a helical screw shaped kind of thing, invented, we are told, by the legendary Archimedes, a Sicilian Greek from the port town of Siracusa, one of the great engineers and mathematicians of all time, who lived about three centuries before Jesus did, in Greek’s golden age, before the Romans. It was Archimedes who discovered that if you turned an auger one way, stuff could be moved along down the line, and if you turned it the other way, stuff could be brought back to you. Put that auger in a tube, and you develop the auger conveyor, moving water from lower to higher for irrigation. Modern farming and modern industry could not survive without augers, to move grain and foodstuffs with great efficiency.

Out on the farm, the tractor with the big auger for digging post holes has saved a lot of lower backs over the years! But it is the reverse effect that most interests me, the part that draws things together. Augers used with metal jaws to hold stuff are called vises; every wood shop needs at least one. And wooden furniture, which for centuries was held together with tricky joinery and hide glue, can now be strongly held with little augers called screws, which are even better than the technology before them, nails, because they draw the wood together.

In addition to augers, we also need to talk a bit about gimlets, and I don’t mean the kind made with gin! I mean the little hand-held tool with a sturdy handle on one end and a little screw point on the other end, used for making pilot holes in wood, so that the wood will not split. And not just wood, either; the old- fashioned corkscrew is a form of gimlet, used to make a helical hole in cork, and then leverage that cork out of the bottle. Of course, modern drilling equipment has pretty much replaced gimlets; we even have screws now that drill their own holes as they are pressured into the wood. But it is a quaint and useful tool when you need create a little opening, and you don’t want the material around to split. Gimlets and augers can teach us a lot about the ways of God.

Finally, to the text: Jesus is getting grief because he has used the title bread of heaven, and he meant himself, and the folks who knew him when he was a little kid think this is kind of high and mighty. Bread of heaven, who does he think he is? His response, according to John, went like this: “*Stop grumbling among yourselves; no one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws them, and I will raise them up at the last day.  For it is written in the Prophets: ‘They will all be taught by God.’ Everyone who has heard the Father and learned from him comes to me.*” Stop grumbling, he says; stop getting wrapped up in stuff that just doesn’t matter, and pay attention to the important stuff. The important stuff is my relationship with each of you. The words I use to describe it are different for different folks, but understand this; no one comes to me unless God draws them close. And right here is where the imagery of God as the universal auger came to my mind, God, whose time is spent slowly turning the vise handle, slowly but inexorably drawing folks and Jesus together, like two boards are drawn together by wood screws. And then, later, Jesus reverses the auger, and raises us up in the last day, lofted, propelled, moved to a higher place, a better place, just like the old water pump invented by our buddy Archimedes!

This kind of thinking creates discomfort among the more free-spirited among us, with the idea of God, like a giant auger, inexorably, irresistibly, drawing us into relationship. It kind of throws free will right out the window, or so it seems. But this view of God and God’s gracious activity on our behalf is thoroughly Wesleyan, my friends. Wesley talked at great length about prevenient grace, the grace that is operating in our lives before we are even aware there is a God, the love that precedes the relationship. I do believe in free will, and in God’s ability to help us make lemonade out of some of the sour lemon choices we make, but I also believe that relationship with our Creator is not up for discussion. Fish, friends, live in water; where they swim, when they swim there, what they eat, that’s all up to them, but living in water? Non-negotiable. Likewise, the kind of relationship we have with God, what we call it and when and where we engage it, these change from person to person and culture to culture, but the relationship itself is, I believe, non-negotiable. Like a giant auger, God slowly and inexorably draws all things into right relationship, which is both the nature and the design of the universe. We can try to fight it, we can valiantly ignore it, or we can go with the flow, but know this: our relationship with the Divine is not a fair and balanced arrangement. It is much like Blondie’s great rock anthem of the late 70’s: One way, or another, I’m gonna find you, I’m gonna getch, getcha, getcha, getcha, one way, or another…

So, if God is like the auger, where does that put us? We, my friends, have the role of gimlet in this little drama. We make way for the auger, start the pilot hole, and do so without causing splitting to the surrounding wood. And I really think that so many of our problems in this life are caused by us trying to be the auger, by us trying to make everything come together, or by us trying to move mountains of material by ourselves. That is not our job; God is the bringer-together, the one who can actually get water to flow uphill. If we were to discover the contentment of helping others open up to God, and discover the ability to do so without trauma and injury to them, and realize that we gimlets are part of the process, an important part, but not the process itself, we would have happier lives. To be more specific, it is God who draws people into relationship, not us. Ergo, we can and should be faithful gimlets, making little openings for God in our lives and the lives of others, but then we need to let God do the divine thing and get out of the way! A gimlet is a great tool, but it’s not a table saw, right? So, we can choose to be more like John the Baptist, prepare the way, urge repentance and right living, stress the need for relationship, and then stand aside and watch God do the inevitable. God will draw the world together, and God will raise us up at the right time, for God’s right reasons. Amen.