

As John tells it, “Then the Jews began to complain about him because he had said, ‘I am the bread from heaven.’”

Nope.

No!

Uh-uh.

Can you imagine the murmuring?

Pppssshh—*bread from heaven!*

Absolutely not.

No way.

That’s NOT how it works.

That’s how I imagine the complaints because Jesus said “I am the bread from heaven.”

It would be as if a guest preacher came and told us that we need to buy our way into heaven. We would instantly raise an eyebrow. We would murmur too! Likewise, when Jesus said, “I am the bread from heaven,” it didn’t only SOUND wrong to his audience, it also sounded OFFENSIVE.

Why offensive? For starters, in their minds, bread from heaven was God’s alone to give, so Jesus saying “I am bread from heaven” meant he was saying he’s from God. Even more: that he IS God. And in these folks’ minds, a person cannot also be God. And God does not come *down* from heaven. God stays up IN heaven; far away from the messiness of human life. Plus, if God is eternal and divine, it’s difficult to accept the idea that God is like bread—perishable and ordinary.

It’s God or bread. Not both.

And, besides, Jesus has a father and mother whom they knew, so he could not be from God or be bread.

We can understand *why* they murmur, but *who are* these Jews who complain? They are the religious authorities of the day, the leaders and faithful who have read and studied the scriptures. They are folks in leadership who maintain the

neat categories of religious life, who faithfully hope to check—and make sure God also checks—the proper boxes according to their faith.

And who are John’s “Jews” NOT? They are not the Jewish people of today. By the time John wrote his gospel, what John and his followers thought about Christ didn’t fit traditional religious teaching. There was conflict; it was painful; people left the synagogue. John writes about these Jewish leaders, his former friends, with hostility still on his heart, and when we read his gospel, we may hear hints of it. So, especially this weekend on the one-year anniversary of the tragic events in Charlottesville, let us leave hostility against and stereotypes about “the Jews” where they belong: confined to the annals of history.

Because John’s “Jews” are, in essence, people just like us. Faithful church people. People who take their faith seriously. Folks assured in their belief, secure in their relationship, and comfortable with their image with God.

Now, consider what it means when Jesus bursts on the scene and doesn’t fit their picture of God. When God doesn’t act according to the regular ways, when God doesn’t check the boxes God normally seeks to check, they get mad. Confused. Maybe scared. They murmur and complain.

We are so like this ancient Jewish crowd. Then, religious leaders quibbled with each other as they interpreted current events; today, turn on any cable news program and you’ll see the same thing. Then, people read their Bible and knew their religious history and had their minds firmly fixed and made up about God. Today, we read our Bible (or some of it) and know our religious history (or a little of it), so we too rest assured that we know, firmly, how God works, what God likes, whom God calls to be pastors or disciples.

We expect God to work in certain, predictable ways. Ways that are recognizable and make us feel secure and comfortable. But then Christ shows up on the scene, and we, like these ancient people, might find ourselves grumbling an awful lot. When Christ’s prophetic message moves the church in a different way than it’s always moved, when the Holy Spirit calls us to consider anything—worship, people, interpretations—that seems new to us, we may get anxious, mad, or scared. We murmur and complain.

But the problem isn’t only that we end up complaining. As the saying goes: to know a little but think *it’s all there is to know* can be fatal. Thinking that we know pretty much all there is to know about God can limit our imagination for

God and for what God is doing here and now. Our comfort zone can blind us to the spots where the Spirit is blowing. Our fondness for security can keep us away from where God is working. Our self-assuredness can deprive us of the new, abundant life that Christ is offering.

That's the mistake the ancient religious people made, and it's the error and temptation we modern people face: we make God too small.

We make God too small.

The good news is that when faced with ancient religious people and their fixed mindset, Jesus took the time to engage with them and explain himself. Likewise, Christ is patient and engages with us. Week after week, we may come to church with our pre-set, comfortable, small expectations about God. And then Christ shows up BIG: with, in, and among the Word and water and bread.

Week after week, Christ reminds us "I am bread!" which both exposes the danger of a categorically limited image of God AND forgives us for it. Christ forgives our shortcomings and our shortsightedness about God by saying, "I am this bread. Which is given for you for the forgiveness of sins. So, I give myself to you in forgiveness."

Week after week, Christ reminds us "I am bread!" which shatters the small boxes in which we put God; which confronts us with the truth that God is greater than our labels and our language and limitations; that God is more than we tend to imagine.

When we encounter Jesus Christ, the Bread of Life, this confrontation gives us a new frame of reference and actively works to oppose our fixed mindsets. No wonder it can be confusing or scary and make us murmur or complain. When God's bigness collides with our human-sized expectations of Godly behavior it may feel, in a word, like a death.

*Like a piece of us, a piece of our faith, or a prior way of conceiving God has died.*

But we follow Christ, so we know that after death comes new life. From crucifixion comes resurrection. From confrontation with our limited imaginations and our sin comes the acceptance of God's bigness and recognition of God's grace.

And grace changes how we, dear religious people, live. Grace opens not only our imaginations but also our hearts. Grace changes how we see God and also how we see and treat our neighbors and our enemies. Grace takes us from being murmuring complainers to being bold proclaimers and generous doers.

I am the Bread of Life, Jesus says.

I am the living bread that came down from heaven, Jesus says.

I am not what you expected, and I am the grace you and this world need.

Thank God for that.

AMEN.