Spirituality
Scripture for Life
Columns
Spirituality



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"Where did that come from?"

"Who does she think she is?"

We make those and more creative, sometimes less polite, comments when somebody throws us off balance. We wander around our little worlds with expectations, conscious and unconscious, that are our own scripts for others to act out. It can be quite upsetting when they don't fit the roles we've assigned them.

Reading today's Gospel, did it strike you as odd that Jesus' critics were upset because he said that he had come down from heaven but didn't seem at all bothered by his calling himself bread?

Of course, in John's Gospel, Jesus also called himself living water, the light of the world, the good shepherd, the resurrection and the life, the image of God, the true vine, and the way, the truth and the life (John 4, 7, 8, 9, 11, 12, 14, 15). He had great expectations for his vocation.

In today's selection from John 6, we see a problem of clashing expectations. Jesus' compatriots and kin may have been thrilled with what he did, but when he declared that he had come from heaven, that was too much. They knew exactly where he had come from. Even if they admired Joseph and Mary, they didn't consider them heavenly emissaries who had brought a son to Earth.

Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

August 11, 2024

1 Kings 19:4-8
Psalm 34
Ephesians 4:30-5:2
John 6:41-51

They knew enough about life to know what to expect from one another.

The underlying conflict between Jesus and his audience was that he wanted to open their minds and hearts to more than what they already had and knew, but they felt safe and secure with life as it was: "Why fix it if it's not broken?" The roles they

expected to play out in their own lives were as constrained as those they put on others: "It is what it is."

They were a bit like Elijah in the incident described in our first reading. Elijah, the target of an assassination plot, had decided to flee and then to give up. "This is enough, Lord, let me die here and now, before they catch up with me!"

But God had greater hopes for him and sent an angel to wake him up and give him food from heaven. Elijah appreciated that and still wanted to let it all come to an end, then and there. But the pesky angel woke him up again, telling him to eat more because he had a long road ahead of him.

This time, he couldn't refuse and went to where God would reveal Self to him. (1 Kings 19:11-15).

It's significant that the angel's job was to wake up Elijah and give him food. It's another way of saying that God's messenger prodded him toward a larger vision of things and promised he could find the strength to move beyond his hopelessness – walking 40 days to get there.

We often think of hopelessness as despair or depression. It's also complacency and a lack of vision. This might be a way of explaining what St. Paul is saying to the Ephesians when he says, "Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God."

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The Holy Spirit calls us into a future beyond our expectations and imagination, no matter that we might prefer our own secure, if not always comfortable, ruts. Accepting Paul's call to be forgiving requires an attitude of openness to the future, a willingness to break free of memories and expectations that only replicate the past in new clothes.

Jesus says that we can't come to him unless the Father draws us and that "everyone who listens to my Father and learns from him, comes to me." Listening to him, allowing him to draw us into new perspectives is what it means to be "taught by God."

Our Creator/Father is the God of the future far more than the past. "Your ancestors ate manna . . . I am the living bread." The Word become flesh is God's invitation into a new and eternal future.

Last week's liturgy invited us to feel our deepest hungers and to ask how Christ wants to satisfy them. This week's liturgy warns us that our expectations may be the greatest obstacle keeping us from knowing what God keeps offering us. The Gospel intends to throw us off balance. We can resist and hold on to what we think we know, or we can risk our equilibrium and be taught by God.

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