

“Rabbi, when did you come here? What must we do to perform the works of God? What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing?” So many questions. So much curiosity. Like little children, these people!

Did you ever get into one of those endless cycles of questions with a toddler? I loved hearing the way that my daughters, nephews and nieces expressed their interest in the world around them, especially in some of the questions they asked about new observations. We were at a state fair when our daughter Emily was two or three years old when she spotted a cow who was relieving herself rather unceremoniously. As cow-pats plop, plop, plopped into the hay on the on the asphalt floor, Emily’s eyes widened and she looked up at her mother and I, and said, “That cow is falling apart!” Well, of course, this led to a great deal of discussion and each of our careful answers produced still further questions. But that’s how little ones grow in knowledge. Learning to make connections is an essential childhood skill that helps children to make sense out of a complex world.

And so I am surprised at how poorly most commentators regard the people in our Gospel who are seeking to make some semblance of sense out of their extraordinary experience. Anyone who has spent much time around little children eventually gets drawn into one of those remarkable sequences of nearly incessant questioning from a little one that begins to feel a bit like the drip, drip, drip of an ancient water torture.

I don’t know why so few biblical scholars or theologians are willing to be at least as patient as a good mother with these folks. Maybe they are tired of the endless questions or frustrated with the misunderstanding that so often seems to arise from people in scripture. After all, as the letter to the Ephesians said, “We must no longer be children...we must grow up in every way into Christ.”

“Rabbi, when did you come here?” An odd question, in a way, because the people asking it were some of those who were among the 5,000 fed on the other side of the lake the day before. Surely, they know that Jesus got to Capernaum after that storm that blew in and out in the night. “What sign are you going to give us?” These are some of the same people who saw the sign that Jesus had done,

recognized him as the “prophet who has come into the world” and tried to make him king, which was precisely why he left them.

Commentators tend to be a little uncharitable and some are quite harsh in their assessment of the collective intelligence of these folks. A number of scholars refer to their total lack of awareness. Others say specifically that, in their dullness, these people have seen no sign at all. A good many say that Jesus dismisses their wrong-headed motivation for searching him out, accusing them of following him only because they got a free meal. “These crowds just do not get it,” one commentator writes. “They did not get it when Jesus talked about the ‘temple,’ did not get the meaning of ‘new birth,’ and now they do not get this talk about life-giving bread. They hear Jesus on ‘bread,’ and they immediately assume he is talking about grub. Jesus serves them by miraculously feeding them; they attempt to make him king. They just do not get it.”

I am troubled by that line of thought. I am troubled by the premise that prompts this whole perspective. Jesus Christ, the bread of life, is not something that we *get*, but something we are *given*. For most of us, it is only after we experience what has been given to us that we are able to begin reasoning our way toward understanding. You see, I could describe a Cape gooseberry for you and if I was quite clever you might get an idea of how this unique little yellow ball of sweet tartness tastes. Or you could taste it yourself and have the delightful experience of trying to figure out what it tastes like: is it like an extremely sweet tomato? Is it figgy or is it more like mango? Maybe some kind of cherry?

Now, let’s go back to the people in our Gospel who were also having a new but substantially more complex experience. After they saw a sign that persuaded them that Jesus was a true prophet, a sincere crowd of people crossed the sea to find Jesus. Perhaps some of them came because they got fed the day before, but still they came. Perhaps others simply came out of curiosity, but still they came. I suppose there may have even been a few who came to challenge this so-called prophet, but still they came. Maybe they did come for what may look like the wrong reasons, *but they came*.

And Jesus answered them.

How many of us came looking for Jesus because we understood that the fully Divine Son of God, the Second Person of the Trinity, was made manifest in the fully

human Jesus Christ so that by receiving the Risen Christ we might claim our inheritance as the children of God? I did not.

I came to a life in Christ at first because my parents brought us to church. I was drawn deeper by a priest who taught me how to serve at the altar. I changed churches in high school because there were some seriously cute girls in the Methodist youth group. I came back to the Episcopal Church after a wide search across religious traditions and after recovering from a few poor choices. Some of the questions I was asking then sound a little naïve now.

But then we all engage new experiences of Christ as beginners—do we not?—as naïve as children. And we ask *beginner's* questions, not dim-witted questions; *children's* questions, not wrong-headed questions. In fact, if anything, they are right-headed questions seeking guidance for unfamiliar territory. That's why I hear a much gentler Jesus, not chastising, but coaxing people deeper into their faith, as if to say: "You may have come because you ate bread in a way that astounded you. That's just fine! Now, come a step further in trusting the God who gives you the true bread of life."

You see, we do something quite like children as we mature in our faith. When children begin to learn real words, their words often don't correspond exactly to the way adults use them. Sometimes, they will use a specific word to cover an entire category or vice versa. They might say "dog" to mean any animal, and "meow" might mean "cat," but only one specific cat.

As we walk toward Christ, we might ask "When did you come here?" trying to express our felt and lived experience of the Divine made manifest. We might ask something like "what miracle will you perform so that we may see it and believe you?" to voice to our desire to live more deeply into unity with God, trying to say not "prove yourself, Jesus," but "I trust you, help my distrust." We might say, "Give us this bread always" as the best we can articulate our soul's deepest joy that wants simply to declare, "My Lord and my God."

And God answers.

Sometimes, God's answers are straightforward and simple, but more often, God responds to our sweetly inadequate questions with unexpected surprises and reversals. Instead of pronouncing verdicts against our sin and selfishness, God offers mercy. Instead of condemnation, forgiveness. Instead of retribution, love. Instead of granting wishes, God gives us God's own self. "This is my Body, which is given for

you...This is my Blood of the new covenant, which is shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins.” God gives us God’s very self not as a reward for “getting it,” whatever that means. Not for understanding the mystery that passes all understanding. God gives us God’s own self simply so that we might be mindful once more—to remember—the mystery of the Word who was with God in the beginning and who was God and who is God through whom all things came into being.

In all our efforts to understand what we have been given, perhaps this, in the end, is the hardest for us to accept: that the sacraments contain God’s unearned, astonishing and life-giving gift of God’s own self. In the face of the mystery that can be apprehended but not comprehended, which questions are the right ones? In the loving embrace of God’s promise here at this table, we are as inarticulate as children, as helpless as babies brought to the font.

So what must we do? Jesus answers, “This is the work of God, that you trust in the One whom God has sent.” Those who come to Christ will never hunger and those who trust will never thirst. Come, eat and be fulfilled, and be mindful once more of God’s immeasurable forgiveness, mercy and healing.