

# “Who’s In Control?”

John 6:41-59

3/11/2001 – Maryvale Drive Presbyterian Church, Philip Siddons

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## Introduction to the text:

This morning I’d like to introduce the text before we read it. It has unique material that only John put in his gospel.<sup>1</sup>

He wrote it near the end (or just beyond) the first century but he didn’t have a copy of the other three gospels on his desk.<sup>2</sup> But like Mark, Matthew and Luke, John had his personal experiences and remembered all the stories that had been told so often, they were strung together roughly in the same order.

We believe that some Christians, in John’s community, thought Jesus’ death never happened—that He didn’t actually die on the cross.<sup>3</sup> These people were in a group of followers whom Church historians have since called “Gnostics.” They were saying that Jesus wasn’t fully human but was some kind of a ghost who appeared on earth for a time. There are even a few phrases in the “Apostle’s Creed” that tried to counter this “phantom” theory of

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<sup>1</sup> And why John (uniquely) added this detail also has something to do with where he put it in his collection of stories about Jesus.

<sup>2</sup> but a lot of career scholars have mapped out PHD’s on this section, and this is what they say

<sup>3</sup> Probably around the year 120 C.E. when John was writing his gospel, there were some people who were involved in a sect called Docetic Gnostics, (you don’t have to remember that name for the test). If you think that is a little hard to swallow, I found a web site on the Internet put up by people who claim to be keeping track of miracles around the world. They talk about miraculous lights appearing in apartment windows in South America and little table-top statues that are bleeding real blood. They even have a well-developed theology about how Jesus was just one extraordinary cosmic leader (among others) who somehow influences the destiny of humanity. You see, there have always been those who attempt to explain the supernatural.

the Gnostics.<sup>4</sup> “. . . crucified, dead and buried . . . He descended into Hell. On the third day, He arose again from the dead, . . .”

As did the other gospel writers, John told about Jesus feeding the 5,000. Because of this miracle, Jesus thought the crowd was going to take Him by force and make Him their king, so He slipped away and found a secluded spot in the hills.

By evening, the disciples left to cross the lake again, only it didn’t go as planned. When they were out about three or four miles, a storm came up and none of them could remember if small craft warnings had been displayed.

Amazingly, Jesus came out to them—walking on the water.<sup>5</sup> According to John, as soon as Jesus reached the side of the boat, the storm stopped and they were instantly at shore.

Well the crowds, who had the free lunch the day before, knew a good thing when they saw it and they went looking for Jesus with their wind surfers and Sea-doo’s.<sup>6</sup> They sailed their boats to Capernium and couldn’t, for the life of them, figure out how Jesus got there—especially since the disciples had left without Him the night before. They had bread and magic on their minds so the first thing Jesus did was scold them for wanting yesterday’s event repeated.

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<sup>4</sup> And interestingly enough, at one point in early Church history, Bauer suggests that there were more Gnostic Christians than there were those we (today) call orthodox.

<sup>5</sup> Unlike the other writers, John didn’t say anything about Peter trying his luck at walking on the water.

He said, “You’re not even here to seek a sign but because you had your fill at the meal. Stop going after perishable food. Instead, get the food of eternal life.”

Somebody yelled: “All right, what does God want us to do?”

“That’s simple,” Jesus said, “believe the One God sent to you.”

Someone else said, “Lets see your credentials because we want to believe. You know, we’re the official chosen people of God and our ancestors ate manna in the wilderness. Like the good book says, they were given bread from heaven to eat.”

But struggling to be patient, Jesus said, “Listen up!” “It wasn’t Moses who gave them the bread from heaven, it was God. And the bread I’m talking about doesn’t have anything to do with your stomach rumbling. What God gives is the bread of life.”<sup>6</sup>

In about a minute, someone cloaked their voice with a pious tone and said, “Give us this bread, always.”

Jesus finally put it to them, “I’m the bread you’re looking for. If you come to Me, you won’t be hungry. Believe Me and you won’t thirst. But I’m telling you now, I’m right in front of you but you’re not buying any of this.”<sup>7</sup>

Well, the crowd goes nuts. “What’s the idea saying that you’re the bread from heaven?” they

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<sup>6</sup> And very subtly, as John is writing this, the word he uses for *bread* is put in the masculine gender, and it can be taken to refer either to bread or to Jesus in Greek. Probably his first readers caught the play on words.

<sup>7</sup> Everything God gives Me will come about and anyone coming to me, I won’t reject. I’ve come from heaven not on my own will but because of the will of the one sending me. This is God’s will. I’m not going to loose anything that was sent my way but it will be raised up on the last day.”

shouted. “He has some nerve. After all, isn’t this Jesus from up in North Tonawanda (Nazareth)?”

A guy calls out: “Why He’s Joe and Mary’s son and they lived down the street from us. In fact, his father fixed one of our kitchen chairs and it still wobbles.”

And then Jesus glared at them and said: “Look at your grousing. Don’t be so sure of yourselves. No one is going to come to Me unless they’re drawn by God. And I’m the One Who will raise you up on the last day. The bread I’m offering makes you live forever.”

And with that, the arguments let loose. One voice, then another, rose above the rest: “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?”

By then, Jesus had apparently had it and He wasn’t going to explain anything anymore. He went on just talking about the metaphor of the flesh and blood. So this morning’s text is this outright metaphoric talk thrown right back at the crowd—referring to His eminent death on the cross.<sup>8</sup> So listen as John, through Jesus’ teaching, emphasizes to his contemporaries that Jesus actually died and wasn’t some kind of ghost. Listen for the phrase “flesh and blood.” The mystery of Jesus being a person and God (at the same time) was difficult enough to grasp without the Gnostics talking about ghosts.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Jesus knew that only a few would understand and the rest would just as soon argue than care one way or the other.

<sup>9</sup> John was also getting his readers to remember that the end of time will someday come and that it is important that they are among Christ’s followers. As John wrote down his collection of stories about Jesus, he linked the feeding of the 5,000 with Jesus’ teaching about His bodily sacrifice which looks forward to the final resurrection. And this perhaps explains why John left out some of the other events that were included in Mark, Matthew and Luke’s descriptions of the miraculous feeding of the multitudes. With some of these subtle complexities, you can see why the text is fertile ground for seminary dissertations.

## John 6:52-59 is read

So how does this relate to our lives today? I think it has to do with the issue of control. Who's in control? "Who really has the credentials?" the crowds were asking. And like those in the crowd then, we wonder where to look to get some sense of control over all the things going on in our lives. If we're trying to make our faith make sense in our life, where should we look for direction?

Throughout history, people have always struggled with who to listen to. And usually God's attempts to communicate were often missed because most people were too focused on their own traditional ways of interpreting things.

Remember Job's comforters? Little did they know they would become household clichés. With the sensitivity of a demolition crew's wrecking ball, they stood over his sick bed and told him he must not have been living right for God to be inflicting such suffering. They had the issue under control—they had an answer, . . . based on their traditional concept of a vengeful God Who pounds us if we step out of line.

Later on, the disciples, equally devoid of empathy, came up to a blind man and (actually) said out loud: "Who sinned bad enough to cause this man to be born blind?" They thought they had an answer for the situation. Fortunately Jesus was nearby and told them that they were all out to lunch with that kind of thinking. Jesus essentially attributed the man's plight to bad luck but quickly and compassionately responded by healing him.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Remember the Pharaoh who was told that God wants the working class given exit visas but who flatly turned them down? And it took some fairly dramatic things like swimming pools filled with blood, and frogs in their morning coffee, even death,

This is a little like the cancer researchers telling us today that the carcinogens plaguing us may be brought on by our own stress and anxiety messing up our immune system. Well, that's just great, so that in addition to getting cancer, we can also feel guilty about it because we must have brought it on ourselves by being too stressed.

Today, there is a lot of emphasis being placed on being in control. Our society acts as if we are so technically and scientifically "in control" that we can do anything. There's an answer for anything, we sometimes think, because whenever we're confronted by hardship, we want to go out and buy the latest "how-to" book to figure it out and regain control. We TELL our doctors to give us a pill, an antibiotic, to fix our problem. You already know that there are people in the Christian Church who act as if they have an answer for everything.<sup>11</sup>

Then there is the prevalent attitude that life is mostly a matter of who or what you know. Those of us who work regularly with technology almost think that the technology (itself) will somehow give us more manageability of the pieces of our lives.<sup>12</sup>

The singer, Cheryl Crow, sees `every day as a winding road, . . . but, at the same time, she's wondering why she feels so alone—why she feels like

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to shake up the Pharaoh enough to (even temporarily) realize that someone else has a different idea on how things should happen.

<sup>11</sup> They talk about "God's will" so much that they sound like they're carrying God around in their back pocket. You may have seen or heard them on radio or television. They want us to think that they have got everything under control, if we'd just "send in a contribution to their efforts."

<sup>12</sup> We know, by now, that just because we can chart life's events with a twelve-thousand dollar plotter, it doesn't mean life will go as planned.

a stranger in her own life.”<sup>13</sup> People feel disconnected from life—alienated from the constant change.<sup>14</sup>

But along came Jesus Who said there’s an entirely different way to go about life than mastery of technology, scrambling our way to the corporate top, or networking with people “in the know.” Jesus taught and showed us that real power, true satisfaction, sustenance, the bread of life, comes in serving others.<sup>15</sup>

So Jesus is saying we’ve got to redefine our concept of success. Because no matter how many hoops we jump through (on the way to the American dream), if we look ahead to the main arena of this circus, there are always going to be people putting more hoops in our path.

Those of you in Sales – isn’t it odd that your sales quota never goes down or even stays the same? Sooner or later we hear the small voice saying, “Suppose you gained the whole world but lost sight of the essence of who you are in the process?”

“Redefining our concept of success.” Sounds like “church talk” doesn’t it? To suggest, in a sermon on a lazy Sunday morning, that we’re supposed to change our whole life’s thinking on what we want most out of life—come on!

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<sup>13</sup> From her 1997 “Winding Road” song.

<sup>14</sup> And if anything, people feel that the more they try to control life, the further behind they seem to get.

<sup>15</sup> And his love for others was such a minority opinion that it was nailed up on the cross and ridiculed as the stupidest thing around. And those who did not understand the symbolism of the communion practices (remembering God’s love in Christ’s sacrifice), twisted the rhetoric, took it literally, and called it cannibalism. For about 5-7 years, some of the Romans thought the Christians actually ate human bodies and drank their blood because of the liturgy in the sacrament of communion.

“Redefining success” may sound like church talk but it was originally Jesus telling us not to set our goals only on things that moths, rust or stock market corrections can corrupt. You see, this new way of thinking is at the core of Jesus’ teachings and our Christian faith. This basic desire to serve others should sit at the center for every relationship we have—both at home and even in our business dealings. It means living in such a way that we are predisposed to discover (and respond to) the needs of others. And how we go about this should come up in every one of our small group studies here in church.

These are the questions to take home this morning. How is God going to break through and make it into our electronic day-timer schedulers? How can we stop our relentless busyness in order to actually do something about what is going on in the lives of people around us? Because “Aunt Gale’s got social security, but it don’t pay her bills.”<sup>16</sup>

So what are we going to do in the face of the need around us? That’s the question you will face, even today as you go about your life with others around you.



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<sup>16</sup> Sings the band No Doubt in their song “Who will save your soul?” although the printed words in the liner notes differ from what is actually sung in this phrase of the song (“You got Social Security but that don’t pay your bills.”).