

“We Are the Community of the Bread of Life!”

Recently, Diane Rehm of PBS introduced one of her guests saying, “In the 1960s, Walter Mischel tested hundreds of preschoolers at Stanford University. In what’s become known as the marshmallow test. Mischel discovered that a child’s ability to” **“delay gratification”** “had major implications for later success in school, workplace achievement and even mid-life weight gain. In a new book, Walter Mischel writes about his pioneering test and argues that will power can be taught as a cognitive skill, even in adulthood. The book is titled, ‘The Marshmallow Test: Mastering Self-Control.’”

Instead of sharing a long account of quotes of **“the Marshmallow Test”** by Mischel, allow me to share a summation of it. Mischel’s researchers had play interviews with hundreds of preschool children. After each child had significant play interaction with a researcher, the child entered another room where they went to the “waiting square” to play another game. A table was set before each child where one desirable item, such as a marshmallow, was placed on the left side of the table and two of that item were placed on the right side of the table. The children were told they could either choose to eat the one item – marshmallow, as soon as they wanted to or they could wait for the return of the researcher and then eat the two items – marshmallows. Some of the children chose to quickly or immediately eat the one marshmallow. Others waited a long time before eating the marshmallow. The one aspect of this of which I am uneasy about is although they told the children the researcher would eventually return and they could then eat the two marshmallows – the researchers stayed out of the room until the children finally gave up on waiting and ate the one marshmallow. Years later, Mischel and his associates followed up with the adults who had been the child subjects of the test. **They discovered the children who waited a long time before they ate the marshmallows were better able to deal with temptations and were more successful.**

During their testing of the children, Mischel and his researchers suggested a few strategies to some of the children to help them delay giving into temptation. One suggestion was to pretend the one marshmallow was only a picture, which you could not really eat and that approach worked!

Mischel describes some of the value of the results of his study, writing, “The public policy implications are that there are ways of enormously increasing the cognitive and the emotional skills that are necessary for people to exert self-control. To have control over their own negative emotions. To resist temptations if they want to resist them.”

It has taken social scientists a long time to come to the same basic conclusion upon which Jesus lived and ministered, almost 1,985 years ago! Today’s Scripture demonstrates how Jesus resisted the temptation to live a very selfish and self-centered life, while many people among his possible or would be followers showed they quickly allowed temptations to control their lives. In our Text, Jesus challenges the selfish way of life and reveals how through himself – the Son of God, the Divine Parent enables us to live the more fulfilling, self-giving, and loving New Life. Jesus does this by raising up the subject of **Holy Communion**. He reminds us we are The Community of the Bread of Life! Since today is World Communion Sunday, this focus on being the Community of the Bread of Life is very appropriate. The author of the Letter to the Ephesians, described well Jesus’ New Life, especially in the portion of his letter, which we used in today’s Call to Worship.

By understanding what Jesus was doing in this Scripture, we are also provided an opportunity to examine aspects of the debates about the Gospel of John. Most modern scholars doubt the Gospel of John was written by or received information from a firsthand witness. They point out John does not include the words of institution for Holy Communion and suggest any eyewitness would have included mention of Communion in reporting what happened during Jesus’ Last Supper with his disciples.

My response is uncommon and somewhat unique. My theory is John knew Jesus shared Communion at his Last Supper but he did not mention it because **that was not the first time Jesus shared it with the original disciples**. Unlike the Synoptic Gospels’ claim that Jesus instituted Holy Communion during his Last Supper, John reveals he may have shared communion much earlier and frequently. Matthew, Mark, and Luke were unaware of the previous Communion experiences between Jesus and his followers because they were not eyewitnesses of the events of which they wrote. For example, they mistakenly saw the Last Supper as a Passover Meal. So, they described Holy Communion as something like a new Passover Meal. The Last Supper, according to John, was held the night before Passover. Jesus died at the time the Passover lambs were slain.

I see today’s Scripture supporting the validity of my theory. First, all four gospels reported the feeding of the 5,000 in similar ways. John’s version is found in John 6:1-13. Specifically, in the Gospel of John, **details are included**, which are missing in the accounts of the Synoptics. I contend John’s details show a better understanding of what actually happened during the Feeding of the 5,000 and its tie-in to Jesus’ confrontation with some of the same crowd in Capernaum. The Synoptics’ failure to know and communicate those details indicate John’s report is that of an eyewitness, while theirs was not.

For example, in John, Jesus brought up the subject of feeding the large crowd of over 5,000 men plus women and children. He intentionally chose to do so in order to fulfill his specific purpose for that occasion. He brought it up to Philip in vs. 5, **“Jesus**

soon saw a huge crowd of people coming to look for him. Turning to Philip, he asked, 'Where can we buy bread to feed all these people?'" On the other hand, the Synoptics portrayed the disciples as being, the ones, who raised the issue of feeding the crowd and, therefore, it was their concerns – they wanted him to send the people away, which forced Jesus to face the issue of feeding the crowd. Instead, as John shows, Jesus intentionally chose to feed them for his purpose.

Only the Gospel of John reported the crowd understood Jesus' feeding of them was a precursor to the Messiah's Feast. We know this because of what the crowd said in vs. 14, ***"When the people saw him do this miraculous sign, they exclaimed, 'Surely, he is the Prophet we have been expecting!'"***

Matthew and Mark unite in saying Jesus sent the Twelve ahead in a boat and then he dismissed the crowd and went up a hill to pray. However, John reveals in vs. 15, ***"When Jesus saw that they were ready to force him to be their king, he slipped away into the hills by himself."*** Jesus refused to allow the crowd's desire for gratification – for him to be a Warrior King to highjack his real purpose. The people were ready to give in to their desire – temptation to have God's Messiah miraculously defeat the Roman Empire.

Further, contrary to what Matthew and Mark claim, Jesus did not order his original disciples to go ahead of him across the lake – they decided to take the boat across the lake because they didn't know where he was. Luke made no mention of the disciples going in a boat without Jesus – was that because he had different information from that which Mark reported and didn't know which was correct?

The Synoptics do not report the response of the crowd to Jesus' feeding of them. Why? The Synoptics don't even seem to realize the crowd's reaction was important. Would not an eyewitness have reported the crowd's response?

Matthew and Mark join John in explaining later Jesus came to the Twelve walking on the water. Yet, only John revealed the people did not know where Jesus had gone and then reported what happened when the crowd from the miraculous meal found Jesus on the other side of the lake, knowing he had not taken the boat there with his disciples. John wrote in vs. 25, ***"When the people found Jesus on the other side of the lake, they said to him, 'Teacher, when did you get here?'"*** Out of the context of feeding the 5,000 plus, John reports starting in vs. 26, ***"Jesus replied, 'I tell you the truth, you want to be with me because I fed you, not because you understood the miraculous signs.'"*** They wanted bread to gratify their wants – they did not understand its meaning in connection with a New Life provided and offered by Jesus. He continued, ***"But don't be so concerned about perishable things like food. Spend your energy seeking the eternal life that the Son of Man can give you. For God the Father has given me the seal of His approval."*** Jesus was again challenging the crowd's inability to overcome temptation – to delay gratifying their desires – needs. He was confronting their unwillingness to perceive his purpose and to truly believe or follow him. Their desires clashed with his mission – with why God had sent him.

The remainder of the Reading shares how Jesus explained the reason God sent him was to enable us to live this New Life. It is through his body and blood that we have the food [bread and drink], which gives eternal life. He repeatedly stated, as in vs. 53-54, ***"So Jesus said again, 'I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you cannot have eternal life within you. But anyone who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise that person at the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink.'"***

I contend, soon afterward, (perhaps the next meal with his disciples) Jesus shared Holy Communion with his followers and continued to do so frequently, including during his Last Supper with the Twelve. My theory helps explain how in Luke 24:13-35, the two followers (not among the Twelve and not present at the Last Supper) came to recognize the Risen Lord when in Emmaus he broke the bread with them!

Indeed, Jesus made partaking his flesh and blood an issue of relationship with and loyalty to him, such as in vs. 66-67, ***"At this point many of his disciples turned away and deserted him. Then Jesus turned to the Twelve and asked, 'Are you also going to leave?'"*** Jesus was not talking about cannibalism. I believe he frequently celebrated Holy Communion with his followers after this confrontation and, so, given the sacrament calls us to unite frequently in reaffirming our commitment to Jesus Christ, the Son of God, it is an even more powerful expression of the unity of the community of believers with Jesus Christ. Let us remember we are **called to the New Life and to being The Community of the Bread of Life!** Amen.