

BREAD OF HEAVEN

JOHN 6: 24-35

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UNIVERSITY CHURCH OF CHICAGO

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The gaunt, white-haired man was standing tall and straight behind the bars of the Winston County jail when Jake Barnes walked in. “Willis, what are you doing in jail?”

“Do you remember when Emerson went to visit Thoreau when he was in jail for an abolitionist protest against slavery and Emerson asked him what you just asked me? Think about Thoreau’s reply: ‘The question is not what am I doing behind bars but what are you doing out there?’ You should not be free, Jake, any more than I should be in jail. Are you here to get me out?”

“Willis, how many jails have you been in since I have known you, and how many times have I gotten you out? Twenty? Thirty? Forty?”

Willis smiled broadly, his white, finely-spaced teeth gleaming in the Oklahoma sun that reflected through the broad, high windows. “Oh, Jake, I don’t think it’s been that many times. But you would know better than I. Anyway, thanks for coming and doing what you can.”

Jake leaned heavily against the bars. “Willis, what did you do this time? Are there any mitigating circumstances? Is there anything I can truthfully say that the judge might believe?”

Willis dipped his head slightly, looked away, refusing to meet Jake’s eyes. “Like any good drunk, I guess I could tell you that I don’t remember what happened. But that would be a lie. I know what I did. I got into an argument with a guy down at Rosie’s bar and one thing led to another...”

Jake turned to the sheriff’s deputy. “Take him out of there. Take us to the sheriff’s office. And you don’t have to cuff him. When he’s sober, he’s harmless.”

The three of them walked down the hot, clanging corridor of the stone building. It was a relic of the eighty-niner days in Oklahoma when the first settlers came storming down after the Army fired a gun on the Kansas border so that whites could steal land previously ceded to the Cherokees, Choctaws, Chickasaws, Creeks and Seminoles—the Five Civilized Tribes who had been forced out of Georgia, Alabama and Florida by the perfidious, racist Andrew Jackson. The first thing the Boomers did was build a substantial jail. It had lasted through five wars and twenty-eight tornadoes.

The sheriff was a tall, florid man whose receding red hair and bulbous nose made him seem comical. But he wasn’t. John Kauffman had no sense of humor, only a grim, Calvinistic determination to punish the guilty.

“Jake,” the sheriff declared as he and Willis entered the room, “don’t even think of it. I am not going to release this drunken idiot again! He stays in jail until hell freezes over, far as I’m concerned. The man is a menace to law, order and decent people.”

They sat quietly, Jake and Willis did, across from the sheriff, his massive oak desk hiding his distended belly. “John, let’s not play games about this. We’ve been through this too many times before. Willis is not a menace. He’s a good-hearted, Christian man who is afflicted with a disease called alcoholism.”

“Disease? Ha! He’s a drunk, and all he has to do is stop drinking. And a Christian? How can a man be a Christian and be a drunk? I don’t believe the two are compatible. ‘Scuse us, Willis, for talking as if you weren’t here.”

Willis ducked his head and waved his hand dismissively. Jake leaned forward.

“John, if Willis had cancer, would you say that he couldn’t be a Christian? Think of alcoholism as a disease, not a moral affliction. I know that’s not the way it gets preached up there at your little church on the hill, but that’s what it is. Christianity is not just about morals and ethics; it’s about the way you live a faithful life. It’s about death, about giving up some old ways, about following Jesus, not just adding more happiness and success. Willis is trying, really trying, to die to his old life. But it’s hard.”

The sheriff rose wearily from his chair and poured himself a cup of coffee from the decanter on his credenza. He did not offer any coffee to Jake Barnes or Willis Gibson as he leaned his backside on the credenza. “Jake, you and I are not going to agree on this. And while I like talking theology with you, we need to get this settled. Willis, what do you have to say?”

Willis seemed surprised that he had been brought into the conversation. He looked up and measured the sheriff with his bright, blue eyes. “Sheriff, I’m not going to lie to you or try to give you some repentant song-and-dance routine. I’m a drunk. I’ve been in more jails than most people know exist. My wife and kids gave up on me long ago. I work in the oil fields, I’m a good worker, but when I start drinking, well....”

The sheriff sat down again, wheeled his chair around and stared out the window. “Willis, let’s continue that conversation that Jake and I were having. Do you consider yourself a Christian?”

“Sheriff, when I was a kid, I went to that same fundamentalist church where you are now a deacon. And I was taught that being a Christian depended on certain behavior. I was drilled in what would get you to heaven and what would send you straight to hell. By those rules, I’m going to hell.

“But I no longer believe that. My friend Jake and I argue a lot about the Gospel of John. It’s my favorite book in the Bible, but Jake prefers the Synoptics—Matthew, Mark and Luke. Well, what intrigues me about John’s Gospel is the way people want to know who Jesus is, where he came from, what he’s gonna do. And when he gives them what they want—‘signs’—miracles, they still don’t believe him.

“I make mistakes. I sin. I lie. I get drunk. I am unfaithful to my wife. I make promises I can’t keep. But, sheriff, I’m as much a Christian as those goody two-shoes up there in that fundamentalist church on the

hill. I have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. I don't have to be good to get God to love me. God already loves me. God just wants me to respond to that love.

"There is only one way to find peace: be reconciled that of yourself you are what you are, and it might not be especially magnificent, what you are. But God has His own plan for making something else of you, and it is a plan which you are mostly too dumb to understand. At least I am."

The sheriff put his cup down very carefully. "Willis, you missed your calling. You should have been a preacher. If you're not careful, you will make a Methodist of me. Tell you what: I'm going to release you into the custody of Jake Barnes, you are going to leave this town tomorrow, and when you come back in a six months or a year or whenever, you come check in with me first thing. You understand?"

Willis jumped up from his chair and shook the sheriff's hand. "You bet. I'll do it. Come on, Jake. Let's get some breakfast. I'm starvin'."

They stood in the bright Oklahoma sun on the front porch of the jailhouse. "Willis," Jake said, "you never cease to amaze me. That was quite a sermon you preached to the sheriff. A decent exegesis of the Fourth Gospel combined with Thomas Merton. I was on to you, but the sheriff was just perplexed."

"Listen, Jake, there was a lot more I wanted to say, but I know when to shut up. I could just as easily have preached my way into five years at the state penitentiary at McAlester. I know what troubles that sheriff. Like most people, he buys into the culture of achievement. He thinks the good life is measured by how much you have. He's a slave to air-conditioning, his car, his I-pod, a personal computer and a microwave. He thinks that if he lives decently, goes to church a couple of times a month and drops a twenty-dollar bill into the offering plate—he thinks that makes him a Christian. There's more to it than that. That's all I was trying to say."

Willis ordered two eggs over easy, sausage and biscuits and gravy at Tom's Café. They watched a line of prisoners come out of the jail. Each was shackled hand and foot, with chains linking waist and ankle to each other. Willis squinted in the bright sunlight as he watched them stumble into the county bus to be taken to the morning court call.

"Look at 'em, Jake. I know every one of those guys. I was in jail with them last night, but I've consorted with people like them all my adult life. Pimps, prostitutes, con artists, thieves, murderers. If I didn't have you as a friend, I would be chained in that lineup right now, on my way to court.

"Life is not fair, Jake. The sheriff thinks it is. He's like most people. Especially rich people. For decades the American rich got richer and nobody complained because the middle-class was getting a bit richer, too. But all that is over. Done with. The middle-class is disappearing and the poor are getting a lot poorer. But the rich are still getting richer. The sheriff has this gnawing feeling in the pit of his conscience that makes him think if he works a little harder and lives a little better, he will get to heaven."

"And you don't think he will?"

“That’s not for me to say, Jake. I don’t know what heaven and hell really mean. All I can tell you is that I believe in God’s providence and I believe in Jesus’ sacrificial death on the cross and that he triumphed over death. And, most of all, unlike most of the people I know, I am not afraid to die.”

Jake stared into space and sipped his coffee. “Willis, it scares me when Jesus talks about the last being first and the first being last. I am one of those in first place, and you have spent most of your life in last place. When those people come to Jesus and ask him about who he is, he invariably gives an enigmatic answer. If those “signs” the people ask for are intended to point toward truth, well, let me tell you, they will get there by a winding and ambiguous path.”

Jake slumped in his chair. He wondered if he had done the right thing for Willis by helping him yet another time. He turned and looked straight at his friend’s wizened, sun-tanned, leather-like face. “Willis, I feel like a Pharisee.”

“Well, you should, Jake. You are a Pharisee. And so is the sheriff. And I sometimes am, too. We have the good life, and we judge others who don’t have it. We think they are immoral and worthless and lazy.”

They left the restaurant and Jake walked toward his car while Willis moved toward the railway station. “I don’t know whether you are a Pharisee, Willis, but today has taught me that I am.”

Willis waved as he walked away. “Don’t worry about it, Jake. There are only two kinds of people in this world: the forgiven and the unforgiven.”