

Edina Morningside Community Church  
United Church of Christ  
Sunday, August 2, 2015  
Rev. Howard K. Bell  
*Gives Life to the World*

Before diving deeply into today's gospel lesson, I begin our text from Psalm 145: 14- 15 *"You lift up those who are falling and raise up those who are oppressed. The eyes of all look to you in hope, and you give them food in due season."* Psalm 145. The psalmist actually captures the meaning of today's message beautifully. I often need to step back in awe that even without the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus, the Hebrew people of the Old Testament, had a deep connection to God, maybe just as deep as what we experience today and expressed it in powerful ways. God gives life to the world by lifting up those who fall and by raising up those who are oppressed. All of us can place on hope in God even when we do not understand God rationally. And the food that God gives is more than physical food to satisfy our physical hunger, it is spiritual food for our souls. Thanks be to God for the poetic words and the powerful message of this psalm.

Last Wednesday evening I asked you to ponder the question "Who is this Jesus? I suggested that the entire Gospel of John is uniquely devoted to an exploration of this question. We also noted that the Gospel of John is filled with symbolic language that is open to wide interpretation. Jesus is referred to as the Word who was with God at creation and who, in fact, was God. Jesus is also referred to as the Light who has come into the world. How does thinking about Jesus as the Word or the Light help us to know who is this Jesus? It helps in symbolic and poetic ways, but not in analytical or rational ways.

For several weeks we have followed Jesus, the disciples and their interactions with the gathered crowds in both the Gospel of Mark and the Gospel of John. We also observed last week, and continue to notice today, that both the disciples and the people in the crowds who choose to follow Jesus clearly do not seem to understand the answers that Jesus provides about his identity. There is something about him that draws multitudes to follow him. They sense God's presence within him. They observe and hear stories of his miracles. The crowds were said to follow Jesus because of the miraculous signs that he performed through healing miracles. They see Jesus as a prophet and leader like Moses who has been sent to meet their individual and communal needs. They also seem to be people, not unlike ourselves, who are practical and logical. They seek to have a rational understanding of the miraculous acts they have observed.

When Jesus performed the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand, they seem to interpret this miracle as confirmation that Jesus, like Moses, had indeed, come to them to take care of their individual needs such as feeding them when they experience hunger. The crowds then seek to anoint him as king. They are not thinking about their spiritual needs as much as they are thinking of their physical needs. This desire of the crowd to anoint him as king is so disappointing to Jesus that he actually moves yet again across the sea during a stormy night so that the crowd cannot anoint him as king.

This crossing of the sea necessitated yet another miracle, but this gospel tells us that only the disciples observed this miracle of Jesus walking on the water. The disciples invite Jesus to join them in the boat, but Jesus does not get in the boat, does not he necessarily quiet the winds, but he helps navigate the boat in a miraculous way so that it immediately arrives at the other side. The purpose of the miracle seems less about providing another sign of Jesus' identity, and more about helping to separate Jesus from a crowd who misinterprets his words and actions.

In the beginning of today's text, we read: *"So when the crowd saw that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they themselves got into the boats and went to Capernaum looking for Jesus."* (John 6:24) We can possibly assume that the day had ended while Jesus was still with them. They went to sleep. When they awoke in the morning they then found that Jesus and his disciples were no longer with them. However, they were most persistent in their pursuit and got in their own boats and crossed over to Capernaum where they found Jesus. Their first question to Jesus is *"Why did you come here?"* (John 6:25). You can almost hear frustration, confusion and disappointment in their question.

Rather than answering their question, Jesus directly challenges their motivations for following him. He says, *"Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves"* (John 6:26) Now it appears that Jesus may be the frustrated one. Jesus understands that what he is offering is so much more than meeting their physical needs but the crowd does not seem to be able to hear this message. Once again he attempts to enlighten them and to encourage them to explore their lives more from a spiritual perspective, *"Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Chosen One will give you."* (John 6:27)

However, the crowd's confusion persists. Even though they have observed signs of Jesus's divine nature, they ask for yet more signs. They even refer to the manna or bread from heaven that was provided to them by Moses. Jesus then does two things. First, he corrects their understanding from believing that it was Moses who provided the manna to the fact that it was God who provided it and not Moses. Secondly, he then changes the tense of the verb to the present tense by proclaiming, *"...it is my Abba who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world."* (John 6:32). Gives life to the world. Certainly, Jesus is not speaking about physical bread providing physical life to individuals, but he is speaking about in spiritual terms about bread which nourishes each individual soul and that gives life to the entire world. Finally, he makes yet another bold, symbolic proclamation *"I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."* (John 6:34) Jesus is not speaking literally, his body is not the bread that nourishes our physical body. This is one of the powerful "I am" messages of the Bible recalling Moses on Mt. Sinai when God said "I am who I am." Jesus said, "I am the Bread of life".

In what ways, might we imagine Jesus challenging us today about our motivations for following him? I am asking us to consider, meditate on and ponder the question, "Why do we choose to follow this Jesus?" Not to question your decision to follow Jesus but rather to encourage each of us to go deeper into our motivations and understandings.

Two weeks ago I shared my personal testimony about following Jesus. I was led to the Jesus path by my parents, I had many influential people in my church and educational settings who inspired me to continue on the path, and I discovered that I could most fully be myself and share my gifts by continuing on the Jesus path.

But I also recognize that I am not so different from the crowds that followed Jesus in Biblical times. I want my practical needs to be met. I do not like physical hunger. I want to have a rational understanding of the purpose of my life. I seek to have a clear understanding of the role that God plays in the world. Were Jesus to incarnate in my lifetime, I also might like to anoint him as King and have him defeat those who give expression to their prejudice, those who treat people unjustly and those who seek to have dominion over others in this world.

As I continue to reflect on the question, “why do I follow Jesus today?” I confess that I seek to be filled with God’s spirit. I seek to be able to love God with all my heart and mind and soul and to extend that love of God to others. I pray for increasing my faith without understanding. I devote my life to following the path of Jesus through my words and actions. I seek to release my fears of scarcity and live into God’s abundance. May it be so.

Commentator, William H. Willimon, says, “*When the church following this one who is the Bread of Life wants to get especially spiritual, we do so at a table, with eating and drinking of bread and wine.*” When we partake of the sacrament of communion, it is this spiritual connection to Jesus, this spiritual connection with God, we seek to embody, to ritualize, to remember. Willimon continues, “*Jesus...risks ambiguity, metaphor, and "thick" communication. He is not trying to obfuscate the truth but rather to reveal a difficult, counterintuitive, countercultural truth.*”<sup>1</sup>

We are privileged to participate regularly in this countercultural practice of communion. Our most meaningful connection to Jesus is shared in communion. Let it be so today. Let us remember this as we seek maintain this faith community so that others who choose to follow Jesus who come after us, may also receive the spiritual food we so clearly need and have available to us today. May it be so. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year B, Volume 3: Pentecost and Season After Pentecost 1 (Prophets 3-16).