

1 Kings 19:4-8
Psalm 34:1-8
Ephesians 4:25-5:2
John 6:35, 41-51

Sermon for August 11, 2024

KEEPING THE FAITH

By Rev. Dr. Don Algeo

Summary: We walk by faith, not by sight.

The central image of our gospel reading from John this morning is obviously bread, as it was in last week's reading. In fact, the lectionary reading for this week has us repeat as its first verse what was the final verse of last week's reading:

6:35 Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

The first sentence of that verse – I am the bread of life – focuses on Jesus, and invites us to think about him and who he is, and the verses prior to it that we read and that Jim talked about last week really have to do with that, the identity of Christ and the part he fulfills in providing and nourishing, not the life of this world, but the life of life of heaven. Christ is to that life as bread is to this life.

But for this morning, we'll think about the second sentence:

Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.

This sentence, and the rest of the passage we read for today, are really more about us, about those who are invited to eat this bread.

In this sense, the entire passage really mirrors the sacrament of the communion table that we participated in last week. In that communion, there are two representations. The table and what it offers – bread and wine – represents Christ himself, and the sharing of that bread and wine represents us, partaking of what it offers, accepting what it offers.

And so, just as last week's reading expands on the representation of who Christ is, so this week's reading expands on the representation of those who partake of and are thereby nourished by what Christ has to offer.

What must be true of us, in order that we may receive what Christ has to offer?

The two verses that immediately follow in our lectionary reading describe people who are not able to receive what Jesus has to offer. Let me repeat them:

6:41 Then the Jews began to complain about him because he said, "I am the bread that came down from heaven."

6:42 They were saying, "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, 'I have come down from heaven'?"

These people looked at Jesus, and what did they see? They saw a young man from the neighborhood, the oldest son of people they knew. Of course, others, like the early disciples, saw exactly the same thing, and decided to follow Jesus, but these didn't. Why didn't they?

The answer can't be because of something about Jesus, because Jesus was exactly the same to everybody. So the difference must be something about them. But what is it? What is the difference?

I think the next two verses give us the answer:

6:43 Jesus answered them, "Do not murmur among yourselves.

6:44 No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me; and I will raise that person up on the last day."

The word Jesus uses here that's translated 'murmur' is the same word used in the Old Testament to describe the discontented complaining of the Jews as they wandered forty years in the wilderness, and in the end, because they were afraid to make the final crossing into the Promised Land, ended up dying in that wilderness. Their problem was that they believed the information that came to them from the

world, rather than the promises of God that came to them through Moses. They lived by their eyes, rather than by faith, and as a result, they ended up missing the great blessing that God had promised.

Jesus says to the Jews, “Do not murmur among yourselves,” and he means by that, do not look to yourselves and to your world for the truth, the real truth, the eternal truth.

I always get a chuckle when I hear religious scholars try to provide naturalistic explanations for the miracles described in the Old Testament. The manna in the wilderness, they say, might refer to a certain kind of sap that falls in the morning from a certain variety of tree native to that region. As if there were enough falling sap in all the trees in the world to feed tens of thousands of people for forty years!

Whether you believe in the historical reality of the story or not, the point is that there is no conceivable natural explanation. The scholars who go around speculating that the manna might have been falling sap are exactly like the Jews murmuring about Jesus: since they can't accept miracles, they have to find a worldly explanation.

And I think that brings us to the meaning of what Jesus says after he tells them to stop murmuring:

6:44 No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me.

He's not saying that God will lasso certain people and drag them to Jesus. He's saying that only those who are drawn to the Father will be drawn to Jesus.

In our lives, we all find ourselves drawn to certain people and things, and not to others. I personally have never felt drawn to mowing my lawn; I may do it, on rare occasion, but not because I feel drawn to it. I do it out of a sense of obligation or embarrassment about what the neighbors might think.

And similarly, we're drawn to certain people, but not to others. Why? Because there's something in us that responds to something about those particular people, something about their personality, about the kind of person they are. The initiative is not on their part. They don't throw a net over us or lasso us, and then draw us to them. It's something in us that responds or resonates to something in them, and we describe that resonance by saying that we feel drawn to them.

What Jesus is saying is that only those who believe in God and are responsive to the nature of God as he really is, the nature of love and kindness and mercy and forgiveness, will be drawn to Jesus himself, as he is. All those drawn by my Father will be drawn to me, will come to me, will believe in and trust in me.

The problem with the Jews of Christ's time was not that they didn't believe in God, but that they weren't drawn to God as he really is. They rather supposed God to be someone of judgment and punishment and prohibitions, and that imaginary figure was what they felt drawn to. So of course, they could never find themselves drawn to Jesus.

The problem for our age goes even deeper than that. The problem for our material age, especially in recent times, is not that we have an inadequate understanding of God, but that for many we have no belief in God at all, no belief or trust in a reality beyond our own material experience, and from which our world gets its own meaning and significance. And without that fundamental spiritual orientation, that fundamental spiritual humility, our search for meaning in the world is like those scholars who search for the origin of manna by investigating tree sap. It would be funny, if it weren't so sad.

So is the situation hopeless? Are we hurtling so rapidly and with such giddy delight and self-congratulation in our ever accelerating material progress that the reliance on God for meaning must now seem ever more quaint and archaic, like the horse and buggy or silent movies or sending birthday greetings through the mail?

The answer is No. But to accept that answer itself requires faith in something else Jesus once said:

“And I, if I am lifted up, will draw all people to myself” (John 12: 32)

Jesus was lifted up, two thousand years ago, on a cross. And he was lifted up not long after that from the grave. And after that, he was lifted up into heaven.

But that was not the end of the story, and surely that is the meaning of what Jesus said. The Christian enterprise of reconciling the world to God has only one tool, and that tool is Christians lifting Christ up.

He is lifted up whenever and wherever the Gospel message is shared, every time a Christian shows forth to the world the qualities of love and mercy and forgiveness in Christ's name, and, most importantly of all because, they are fundamental to

everything else, in the holy sacraments of Christian baptism, Christian fellowship, and Christian Communion.

And yet here we are, living in a material world, a world that seems ever to seek its meaning in its own worldly preoccupations, confidence in its own worldly achievements, wealth in its own worldly treasures, hope in its own worldly idols, moving farther and farther away, full of complacency, from the true source of goodness, beauty and truth. How can we continue to believe in Christ's promise that he will draw all people to himself, if we only keep lifting him up?

The answer, of course, is that if you live by sight, you can't. But we live by faith, not by sight.

We believe manna falls from heaven.

And so our prayer for today, Dear Lord, is that you maintain in our hearts, even if not in our heads, our attraction to You, to the goodness and truth and beauty of which you Yourself are the source and the sustenance. We pray for the courage of our faith in You, for the nourishment of our trust in You, for the peace of our company with you, and with your beloved child, Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, whom we lift up to you and to the world today by praying for these things in His name.