

Sermon

“Do You Also Wish To Depart?”

A Sermon for Cary Presbyterian Church

Sunday, August 8, 2021

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

Prayer for Illumination

You are the bread of life, Lord, and we know that our lives come from you and return to you. We join in that long lineage of seekers who wish to follow you. And yet, we echo your first disciples who said, “This teaching is hard, who can accept it?”

So give us ears to hear your truth today, and hearts to hold even your inconvenient summons to follow in a hard way. Remind us, Lord, that you are benevolently inclined toward us and that you are with us and that you will go with us wherever this life takes us.

We are present because we count ourselves among those who do *not* “wish to depart.” So speak that we may listen, teach that we may learn, invite that we may respond in ways that glorify you and join us to your works of redemption. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

John 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. 36 But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe. 37 Everything that the Father gives me will come to me, and anyone who comes to me I will never drive away; 38 for I have come down from heaven, not to do my own

will, but the will of him who sent me. 39 And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. 40 This is indeed the will of my Father; that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day.”

John 6:41 Then the Jews began to complain about him because he said, “I am the bread that came down from heaven.” 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’?” 43 Jesus answered them, “Do not complain among yourselves. 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. 45 It is written in the prophets, ‘And they shall all be taught by God.’ Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me. 46 Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father. 47 Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life. 48 I am the bread of life. 49 Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. 50 This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. 51 I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”

John 6:52 The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” 53 So Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. 54 Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; 55 for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. 56 Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. 57 Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. 58 This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever.” 59 He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum.

John 6:60 When many of his disciples heard it, they said, “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?” 61 But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, “Does this offend you? 62 Then

what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? 63 It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. 64 But among you there are some who do not believe.” For Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe, and who was the one that would betray him. 65 And he said, “For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father.”

John 6:66 Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. 67 So Jesus asked the twelve, “Do you also wish to go away?” 68 Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. 69 We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.” 70 Jesus answered them, “Did I not choose you, the twelve? Yet one of you is a devil.” 71 He was speaking of Judas son of Simon Iscariot, for he, though one of the twelve, was going to betray him.

- I. Five years ago I was serving on the Committee on Ministry in Presbytery of the Northern Plains.**
 - A. My role at the time was principally to work with congregations in crisis. Schism in particular.**
 - B. Was invited to attend a conference of the Synod of Lakes & Prairies designed to support Leaders in the Synod.**
 - C. There I met Mark Achtemier who was giving the keynote presentation.**
 - D. Today’s message owes much to my conversations with Dr. Achtemier and to the ideas he kindly conveyed to me in subsequent emails through the year 2016.**

- II. I was keen to be in conversation with Dr. Achtemier because I was newly involved with the Institute of Church Renewal.**

- A. I was already thinking not just about my congregation, but thinking about the larger church and what renewal might look like in the 21st century.**
- B. It was Mark Achtemier who first helped me to entertain the possibility that the “decline” if you want to call it that, of the PC (USA) in recent decades might possibly be seen as a cause for hope.**
- C. Mark suggested that perhaps the changes coming to the church were a way that God was, in mercy, helping us to let go of some of the idols we have been worshipping about church and what success at church looks like.**

III. The idols of American Protestantism

- A. Numbers — A faithful church is a growing church.**
 - 1. My home church was the only church I knew.**
 - † In early 70’s 25 people carved off of John Knox Presbyterian**
 - † By early 80’s 300**
 - † By early 90s 600**
 - † Peaked at roughly 1000**
 - † Since the peak has experienced the same slow reduction in size that nearly all congregations are experiencing in the last 25 years.**
 - 2. Churches grow in many ways and the number of members on the roll is only one of them.**

† And yet, I was taught in seminary that if I was doing what I was supposed to be doing, a congregation would grow.

B. Wealth — A financially affluent church is a faithful community.

1. The first aspect of someone's life to leave the church when discipleship is uncomfortable is the wallet.
2. Add to that the kind of “prosperity gospel” which can be heard on nearly every Christian radio and TV station . . . a dubious theology BTW.

† The very last thing that Christians in NA need to be told — we who already are consuming far more than our share of the world's resources — is that God wants us to be richer and more acquisitive consumers!

C. Uniformity of thought — If we could just get everyone to agree about everything we could stop arguing and start doing ministry.

1. I have spent years working with congregations in schism and I can tell you that this idea is a lie. It is *not* true that if we could just get rid of people who believe *that* or who want *that* for the church — we would then be able to faithfully engage in the work of the church.
1. This is far different from unity in Christ. Unity in Christ says, no matter what our differences, we *all* belong to Christ and we thus belong *to one another* and as the

children's message taught last week . . . the foot should quit telling the lungs how to breathe.

† Brother Augustine

- D. Power — Isn't the community of faith supposed to be powerful?**
- 1. Wouldn't it be better if we controlled congress? Or the local school board?**
 - 2. Let us not forget that Jesus was tempted to power by Satan in the wilderness and he eschewed becoming the ruler over the nations of the earth.**

IV. In 1999 I was awakened from my sleepy discipleship by something Henri Nouwen said.

- A. I recently rediscovered these lectures give at Yale in 1978.**
- B. He was talking about compulsive ministers but you and I can translate his thoughts to all Christians without doing harm to his point.**

Our society is not a community radiant with the love of Christ, but a dangerous network of domination and manipulation in which we can easily get entangled and lose our soul. The basic question is whether we ministers of Jesus Christ have not already been so deeply molded by the seductive powers of our dark world that we have become blind to our own and other people's fatal state and have lost the power and motivation to swim for our lives. Just look for a moment at our daily routine. In general we are very busy people. We have many meetings to attend, many visits to make, many services to lead. Our calendars are filled with appointments, our days and weeks filled with engagements, and our years filled with plans and projects. There is seldom a period in which we do not know what to do, and we move through life in such a

distracted way that we do not even take the time and rest to wonder if any of the things we think, say, or do are worth thinking, saying, or doing. We simply go along with the many “musts” and “oughts” that have been handed on to us, and we live with them as if they were authentic translations of the Gospel of our Lord. People must be motivated to come to church, youth must be entertained, money must be raised, and above all everyone must be happy.

Nouwen, Henri J. M.. The Way of the Heart: The Spirituality of the Desert Fathers and Mothers (Kindle Locations 118-121). HarperCollins. Kindle Edition.

E. Nouwen’s observations have me thinking about our work as a church

- 1. Both as a single congregation at CPC**
- 2. The larger Christian community in the US.**

F. The line I’ve been fixated on is:

Our calendars are filled with appointments, our days and weeks filled with engagements, and our years filled with plans and projects. There is seldom a period in which we do not know what to do, and we move through life in such a distracted way that we do not even take the time and rest to wonder if any of the things we think, say, or do are worth thinking, saying, or doing. We simply go along with the many “musts” and “oughts” that have been handed on to us, and we live with them as if they were authentic translations of the Gospel of our Lord. People must be motivated to come to church, youth must be entertained, money must be raised, and above all everyone must be happy.

G. I keep thinking about the question:

If Jesus tells us “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded

you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:18-20) — how do we best go about “making disciples?”

V. It is another way to ask “what is a successful church?”

A. Is it:

- 1. A growing church?**
- 2. A financially secure church?**
- 3. A community of happy and content people?**
- 4. A church with influence in the broader social and political questions of the day?**

B. It seems clear to me that whatever else “making disciples” is — it begins with individuals who have found a love for God which is so compelling that all other kinds of calculation fall away.

C. Disciples are passionate about their Lord and are largely uninterested in the question, “what’s in it for me?”

1. Earlier in Chapter 6 of John’s gospel when the crowd followed him to the other side of the sea, John describes this exchange

John 6:25 When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, “Rabbi, when did you come here?” 26 Jesus answered them, “Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. 27 Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you.

- 2. Jesus is saying to them . . . be careful about the motivations of your discipleship.**
- 3. That is a caution and a concern every disciple of every age might well consider.**

- D. Not to put too fine a point on it . . . but *if* we were to judge the “success” of a congregation by its size, or its wealth, or its influence in the halls of power, or its happiness . . . we would simply be borrowing categories of “success” from the broader culture.**
 - 1. When Jesus said, “make disciples” he said nothing about size, or wealth, or influence, or happiness.**

VI. We might look to Jesus in John to see how *he* made disciples:

- A. Jesus has just fed the 5000 with two fish and five loaves.**
- B. Over night Jesus and the disciples have gone to the other shore of the Sea of Galilee.**
- C. The crowds of followers have sorted out where Jesus has gone and have followed.**
- D. They want him to give a sign to prove he’s legit**
 - 1. Forgotten the bread and fish already?**
 - 2. “What have you done for me *lately*.”**
- E. He says,**

I am the bread of life. 49 Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. 50 This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. 51 I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”

- F. This upsets people.**
 - 1. Even the 12 closest disciples say, “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?”**
 - 2. To which Jesus asks, “Does this offend you?”**

G. And instead of listening to the discontent of the large crowd he had gathered . . . Jesus won't let it go . . . he doubles-down on his offensive speech.

61 But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, "Does this offend you? 62 Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? 63 It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. 64 But among you there are some who do not believe."

H. With Hind-sight you and I know that Jesus is making a connection with the sacrament of the Lord's Supper with all this talk of eating flesh and drinking blood.

1. But it is not hard to see how difficult this kind of message would have been for his first hearers to accept.

I. John simply reports:

John 6:66 Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him.

VII. The whole of my adult life as a Christian has been lived in decades when the settled description of the church in the US is that it is "in decline."

A. The numbers show a persistent trend.

**1. Even in the last 8 years (2013-2017)
1.7 million to 1.2 million Presbyterians (USA)**

B. With fewer giving units there are often fewer dollars.

C. Fewer congregations financially viable . . . clergy are expensive.

D. As sizes shrink, and dollars are rare, anxiety has grown.

1. **Too often decisions have grown from fear of the reduction in size.**

VIII. So, it is worth asking, “What did Jesus do when ‘many of his disciples turned back from following him and no longer went about with him?’”

A. He stayed out in the countryside among the peasants — loving God, and caring for his neighbors.

B. In chapter 7 his brothers urge him to go South to the places of high population and be spectacular:

“Leave here and go to Judea so that your disciples also may see the works you are doing; 4 for no one who wants to be widely known acts in secret. If you do these things, show yourself to the world.”

C. But Jesus remains in Galilee - simply doing what he saw was needed.

D. Jesus seems unconcerned about the reduction in the size of those who followed. He doesn’t even mention it.

1. Which is better?

a. A huge following of people only nominally dedicated?

b. A much smaller collection of disciples who understand that to follow him means to pick up their own cross and follow him?

IX. I’ve already gone on too long this morning ...

A. It is enough to ask the question about what is our true motivation in ministry?

B. Can we be content with Loving God and loving our neighbors without a lot of anxiety about how

spectacular that is?

C. My hunch is that the church of the coming decades is likely going to be an unimpressive church in the eyes of the world.

1. In all likelihood:

† **Less populous**

† **Less wealthy**

† **Less powerful**

† **Less spectacular**

But for all that *it does not have to be less faithful* — and that, after all, is really *the only thing that counts*.