

“The Stuff of Life” (Part 2)
John 6:35, 41-51

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Joseph A. Novak on August 19, 2012 at the First Presbyterian Church of Ithaca, Michigan.

In November of 2006, Katie and I visited the Getty Museum of Art in Los Angeles to see a special exhibit called “Holy Image, Hallowed Ground.” The exhibit featured icons and art pieces taken from St. Catherine’s Monastery, a third-century monastery built and operated at the foot of Mt. Sinai, the enduring symbol of God’s presence with his people. A stunning collection of pieces over a thousand years old were on display.

One of my favorite pieces was an icon called simply: “Anastasis”, resurrection. It has many variations and many different colorful interpretations, but this particular version at the Getty struck me with its rich theological depth.

In it, the figure of Christ is standing in the middle of the frame, standing, with one hand gripping a wooden staff, the top of which is a cross. Beneath his wounded feet are several skulls and bones mixed with shattered locks and broken keys partially buried in a pile of dirt. His gaze is fixed on two figures to the right of the scene who have only just begun to emerge from stone graves, a man and a woman, both shrouded in cloaks, their faces sullen and gloomy. The empty hand of Christ is stretched toward them, grasping onto their wrists as if to pull them from their graves. On the opposite side of this scene is the heavenly realm, where the same two figures are now wearing crowns and are clothed in bright raiment, their faces glowing. The man and woman Christ pulls from the grave are understood to be Adam and Eve, the everlasting representatives of the human race, a race who always wants to become God rather than serve God.

But curiously, Adam and Eve are not grasping onto Christ, in fact, their hands are limp, unable to do anything to help themselves. They are caught up in the strong grip of the risen Lord.

I stood and examined the image for a while, feeling a bit like Dostoyevsky, who was once so taken with a portrait of Christ, that he was reduced to muttering and had to sit down in order to continue gazing at the picture. There was something compelling about this image, something undeniable about the subjects, something captivating about the deeper meaning of this art. But what was it?

Turning to our text for today, we continue to eavesdrop on this argument about bread from the sixth chapter of John’s gospel. Jesus has the floor for most of today’s installment, and he is trying to explain a comment he had just made. A few verses earlier, Jesus had said “I am the bread of life that has come down from heaven.”

Two weeks ago, we heard Jesus say, “I am the bread of life” and we took him seriously. Jesus *is* the stuff of life, the substance of what holds the universe together. Jesus, the Word of God, is the basic necessity for all life to be sustained. And here, Jesus takes us a bit further down the rabbit hole and says that he is the bread of life that has come down from heaven.

Now, wait just a minute, Jesus, the people began to say. You’re certainly gifted by God, you can do some pretty interesting things with bread and fish, and some people say you walked

on the water, but let me stop you right there. The text says they began to complain. Other translations say they “grumbled” or “mumured” or “muttered.” I find it interesting that the word here is the same exact word used in Exodus when the people of God were muttering and complaining about not having enough water in the desert. We often grumble when things don’t turn out the way we’d thought.

Two-year-olds, it turns out, are excellent at inventing a scenario in their minds and expecting it to be reality. Whether its having cookies for breakfast, or going back on vacation when you’ve just returned home, or reading a book that you don’t own; when reality hits, look out. Grumbling, muttering, murmuring.

But aren’t we just the same? Not the car we were hoping for, not the house we were dreaming of, not the job we were searching out, not the school we thought it would be. Not the husband you thought he was, not the children you intended them to be.

So these folks complained. If God was interested in their salvation, surely he would look at the burden the Roman Empire was on their livelihood, surely he would care they they are hungry, they they have no future, that they are stuck in a moment that they can’t get out of. If God really cared, at the very least, he would give them a sign, something that would show them that they are still part of God’s family. But when they ask for a sign, something tangible like bread, they get a metaphor. We need bread! And this Jewish peasant named Jesus tells them “I am bread.” So they complain. “Boo! Aren’t you Jesus? Joseph and Mary’s son? We know you, we know you parents. We know where you came from. What’s are you going on about being “from heaven?”” This is what prompted Jesus to take the floor in this debate.

And in his response, Jesus says two stunning things to these complainers. To us, really. Two declarations here. Two exquisitely beautiful referendums on our classical conception of God. If I could summarize Jesus’ position here it would this: One God draws us to salvation so that, two, we might believe in Jesus.

First, God draws us to salvation. After telling them to quit complaining, Jesus says: “No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me.” This is probably the more stunning of the two statements: God draws us to salvation.

In our culture, in our society, in our twenty-first century modernist worldview, we have become intoxicated by our own ability to understand and to know things. God, it has been argued, is just another concept to be understood and if you understand the right set of arguments, you’ll come to believe that God, in fact, exists. That is, if you understand the right logical sequence of statements, many Christian apologists have suggested, then you will come to accept the existence of a God. They say things like, “If you just read this book, if you go to the grand canyon, if you climb this mountain, if you just open your eyes, if you listen to this song...how can you not believe in a God?” I’ve heard this said by countless well-intentioned Christians, trying to make our beliefs tenable and comprehensible to their neighbors. According to these folks, the evidence for God’s existence is so overwhelming that they simply do not understand those who refuse to believe it.

But this sort of logical and reasoned approach to God is the precise thing Jesus is criticizing here. You don’t come to God! God draws you. As Christians, we don’t “put our trust in

God,” nor do we “invite Jesus into our hearts.” We are the participants of God’s graceful activity in our midst.

God moves first, God moves most, God moves all of us. Our eyes are opened to see that God has already saved us, already redeemed us, already rescued us. We have no divine-human cooperative, we were helpless and God drew us to himself. God causes us to believe, God works actively in the hearts and minds of the human race to see him rightly. We call this sort of activity “revelation.” God desires to be known, God wants us to know him, to love him, to worship him and so, God draws us to him and speaks to us.

If you’ve ever gazed up at a starry night and thought, “surely there is a God” then give thanks, because that’s revelation. You didn’t come to that on your own. If you’ve watched me splash the water in this font and felt the weight of your sins lifted from your shoulders with the words: “Your sins are forgiven”, that’s revelation. If you’ve been inspired by a sermon or a hymn to think deeply about the words of Jesus and to shape your life, your finances, your politics to reflect what you have heard, that’s revelation. And this kind of revelation always comes from God, through Christ’s presence in the Holy Spirit.

You can’t do this on your own, you can’t think this on your own, you can’t reason this out. Jesus says: No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me. If you want to know God, if you want to love God, if you want to serve God, you are being drawn to him. For God draws us to salvation.

Secondly, God draws us to salvation *so we can believe in Jesus*. Jesus tells them: Everyone who has been drawn to God comes, incontrovertibly, to the person of Jesus. “Only the one sent by God has seen God,” Jesus says, “Truly, I tell you, whoever believes this has eternal life.” You don’t have a choice. If you want God, you get Jesus.

For as St. Paul so beautifully put it in our epistle text: Jesus Christ is the image of God, he is the firstborn of all creation, For in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. In him, all things hold together. He is the head of the church, he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in Him, all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, in heaven or on earth, making peace through the blood of his cross.

So if you want to know God, you’re going to get to know Jesus. You don’t have a choice. Anyone who has an encounter with this God also has an encounter with Jesus. For God is always speaking through him. Jesus is the eternal Voice of God, the Voice who speaks into your heart and stirs up something deep within you that says, “Yes, the world is a grace-filled place,” “Yes, my life has meaning and purpose,” “Yes, I am known and loved by God,” “Yes, because Jesus was obedient, I have been set free from sin and death.” “Yes, I have hope for this life and beyond.”

Our belief in the work of Jesus Christ arrives precisely because God wills it to be so. We can’t control this belief, we can’t guarantee its presence everyday, we can’t wrangle it or wrestle it into neat and tidy boxes or systems. The stuff of faith in Christ comes purely as an

extension of God's grace. God gives it abundantly, and God assures us that it will be enough.

This is the hardest thing for our culture to recognize: We can't control God. We can't possibly know all God's nooks and crannies, we are ever climbing the mountain of faith, being pulled up its face by Jesus Christ. If you believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God who died for the salvation of the world, it's a miracle. If you hear the words I'm saying and they stir up something within you, it's a miracle. If you come to church and leave a different person, a more generous person, a more gentle person, a less-addicted person, it's a miracle. Revelation is a miracle, it comes from outside, it comes to us without our knowing it, and it often turns our worlds upside down.

The great twentieth century novelist Flannery O'Connor tells the tale of Ruby Turpin, a well-to-do, plump white woman who kept herself up at night by organizing all the people of the world into social hierarchies, herself conveniently near the top. Her other hobby was pretending Jesus would ask her if he should make her ugly or trashy or a member of another race. She agonized of the weight of this decision, because she was so glad to be herself.

On the outside, Ruby appeared a saint. On the inside, she was a racist, elitist, stubborn woman who rendered judgment on everyone, deserved or not. One day, Ruby found herself in a doctor's office waiting with her husband. There she began talking with another like minded woman about the ills of society and the problems with this race of people or with that class of people. During the story, Ruby keeps making eye contact with Mary Grace, a college student reading to herself in the corner⁴⁴. Mary Grace would sneer at Ruby and scowl whenever she spoke.

For most of the story, Ruby kept her judgmental, racist attitude to herself, but just at the climax of the story, she exclaims out loud, so everyone can hear her: "If there's one thing I am, it's grateful. When I think who all I could have been besides, I just feel like shouting, "thank you Jesus, for making everything the way it is! It could have been different!" Oh thank you Jesus! Jesus! Thank you!"

In response to this, Mary Grace threw her heavy college textbook and hit Ruby right between the eyes, knocking her out of her chair. Mary Grace leapt on top of her and started choking her. "Go back to hell you old wart hog!" She said. That night, Ruby was trying to assure herself that she was not, in fact, an old wart hog destined for hell. Looking at the sky, she became worried that God was trying to send her a message in the doctor's office. Enraged, she yells at the sky: "After all I've done for you, Who do you think you are?"

And the reply came in a vision: A great parade of people were processing from the earth into heaven, across a great highway. At the front of the line were all the people who Ruby deemed ugly, trashy, and not worthy of her time. And at the back of the line were folks like herself, whose faces were stunned that they had it all wrong and that God's favor is obstinately different than they thought. For Ruby, like for all of us, revelation comes from the outside. It hits us like a book in the face. It shakes us, it changes us, it gives us visions, it causes us to re-evaluate everything we thought we understood. We believe because we've been hit in the head by a book, we've had an encounter with the God who measures out his grace without question and, ultimately, without our cooperation.

And this is what I found so compelling about that iconic image of salvation and resurrection in the Orthodox painting. Adam and Eve aren't even holding on to Christ. They are pulled from their tombs only because Christ came to them and holds fast to their weak, paralyzed hands. It is Christ who drags them from the tomb and hurls them into the heavenly realm.

It is the risen Christ who breaks the locks of hell, It is he who Isaiah calls the Key of David who shatters all other keys, It is he who Peter calls the Author of Life who crushes death beneath his feet. Salvation is not a cooperation between the human and divine, it is not an equal grasping of our hand into God's hand. It is not dependent on us to "make the first move", or to "make a decision for Christ."

As one anonymous hymn writer put it:

*I sought the Lord and afterward I knew,
He moved my soul to see him seeking me,
It was not I who found, O Savior True
No, I was found of thee.*

It is only, ever, and always the risen Christ who holds our hand and pulls us from our tombs. For us as Christians: It is all Jesus, all the time, forever. Apart from this, we have no basis for our faith and no message to proclaim. Apart from this, we have no hope for the future. Jesus says: "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.