

Title: When Getting It Right Is Getting It Wrong

Text: John 6:1-33

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Immanuel Baptist Church

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The Scripture text for today's sermon is fairly long and I debated on whether to have Lisa read this long of a text. But familiarity with the overall passage is necessary for understanding what John is doing by showing us how the crowd of people respond to Jesus, and perhaps we shall see something of ourselves in their response.

John tells us that a great crowd of people were following Jesus because they saw the "signs" Jesus performed in healing the sick. It's interesting that the writer calls these "signs." The Synoptic Gospels mention a number of miracles performed by Jesus and there the miracles serve as signs of the whole-making, transformational power of the kingdom of God. In John, however, only a few miracles are recorded, and here they are distinctively referred to as signs, because in John's Gospel their main function is to reveal the identity of Jesus and point to his capacity to bestow eternal life. Their function in the Gospel of John is different than the other Gospels.

John says here that the crowd saw the signs and was attracted to Jesus. But what did they see? Did they see with any depth of spiritual perception? Did they see with any discernment of meaning or significance? What follows in our story is another "sign"—the feeding of the multitude through the multiplication of the bread and fish—but they fail to "see" its meaning.

In verse 14 John says, "After the people saw the sign Jesus performed, they began to say, 'Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world.'" They recognize in Jesus the fulfillment of the expectations associated with Moses and the prophets—that Jesus is the final prophet who would make God's will known and usher in the time of salvation. If our story ended here we would undoubtedly judge the crowd's response a positive one. But John goes on to say in the next sentence: "Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain to pray."

This may be John's equivalent to the temptation scene in Matthew and Luke where the tempter entices Jesus to assert his power and become ruler of the world. In the Synoptic Gospels Jesus resists the temptation and Satan departs; here Jesus resists and he himself departs from the crowd to a place of solitude. The crowd recognizes Jesus as God's prophet who will make God's will known, but they assume that they already know what that will or purpose is. They recognize in Jesus the Redeemer, the Savior, but they assume they already know the nature of that salvation.

They want to make Jesus king and they know the kind of king they want: A king who can take care of their needs, one who can supply their hunger, one who can take a few pieces of bread and fish and feed a multitude. He's their man.

What do we want? What do most Americans want? A Redeemer who will guarantee our place in heaven? One who will ensure that all of our needs are met here and now?

The Presidential campaigns of our two candidates are now in full bloom, and of course, analysts will be analyzing them to death. But what does the majority of middle class Americans want in a President? Do we want someone who will make human rights a top priority? Someone who will pursue every avenue of peace before there is even mention of war? Someone who will work to eliminate the inequities in our economic and political system so as eliminate poverty and provide adequate health care for every person? Someone who believes in restorative justice and the worth of every individual? What do we want? What do the polls say? It's all about the economy isn't it? We want someone who will make life better for us and our kind. This folks who want to make Jesus king are just like you and me.

Jesus, of course, resists this kind of pressure. Instead of playing into it or using it for his advantage he withdraws. Jesus dances to the beat of a different drummer. Jesus has come to save the world, not save us from the world or out of the world, but save the world. And the world needs saving—from its ego-centeredness and covetousness, its prejudice and contempt, its hatred and evil, its resentment and bitterness, its jealousy and envy, its self-hate and self-destruction. And to say that Jesus has come to save the world is to say that each of us needs saving. It must start in us.

We might ask ourselves: What beat do we dance to? Are we swept along with the crowd? Do we share Jesus' love for the world or is it primarily about what we want Jesus to do for us? Jesus resisted the pressure to pursue his own greatness or grasp after power, because those were the very things he wanted to save the world from.

I think it is interesting that the Gospel of John which has a highly developed Christology, where Jesus is clearly presented as divine, is also presented as subordinate to the Father. The Son seeks not his own glory or honor, but the glory and honor of the Father. Even though the Son and Father are one in mind and heart, the Son lives for the glory of the Father. It is not his will that he seeks to do, but the will of God. Even though Jesus, in this Gospel, proclaims himself as the living Bread from heaven, he does not glorify himself. He does not seek worship; rather he directs that worship to God. True worshipers, says Jesus, in his conversation with the woman of Samaria, worship the Father in Spirit and in truth. They do not worship Jesus; they worship the Father. They do not worship the Word made flesh; they worship the One who sent the Word into the world.

It is true that after the resurrection when Thomas touches the resurrected body of Jesus he says, “My Lord and my God” in a spirit of worship. But never in John’s portrayal of Jesus does Jesus, even though he makes some outstanding claims about himself, he never seeks worship. But what have we done in the church? We have made worshiping Jesus the most important thing. We have even elevated worshiping Jesus over following Jesus. Worshiping Jesus is not the goal of the Christian religion. The goal of the Christian religion is to follow Jesus—to be like Jesus, to love like Jesus. Jesus will later say to his disciples: “Love one another as I have loved you.” That is the goal of discipleship.

Evangelical theologian Dallas Willard writes: “Jesus as the actual teacher of his people has disappeared from the mental horizon of our faith. In that capacity he is not part of how we ‘do’ our Christianity today.” We have substituted worshiping Jesus for practicing Jesus. Willard observes that the root of the human problem is the character of the inner life. The solution to that problem is not worshiping Jesus, but following Jesus, learning from Jesus how to think and live with each other in healthy, redemptive ways. C. S. Lewis wrote in his classic work, *Mere Christianity*, that “putting on Christ,” or having the character of Christ formed in us, or coming to have “the mind of Christ” is the whole of Christianity. He says emphatically “there is nothing else.”

The earliest, most widespread Christian confession and affirmation was simply, “Jesus is Lord.” That confession stands at the center of the New Testament and the earliest Jesus movement. But this confession was not originally about worship, it was first and foremost about discipleship. “Lord” was one of the titles of the Roman emperor: Caesar was called “lord.” To say “Jesus is Lord” is to say that Caesar is not lord. It involved a change of allegiance and loyalty. (Isn’t it ironic that today at least one group of Christians have made loyalty to Christ and loyalty to a particular political party or agenda synonymous? How strange.) To say that Jesus is Lord is to say that nothing else competes with my loyalty to the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, whose Spirit is with us and in us forming us into his likeness. It’s about lifestyle and commitment to a way of life that shapes our character into the character of Jesus.

Gandhi as far as I know never worshiped Jesus as God. But he was a far better Christian than I will ever hope to be. He practiced unconditional love and forgiveness. He applied Jesus’ teaching of nonviolence and love for enemies in volatile, hostile situations. He never worshiped Jesus, but he was a better follower of Jesus than any of us here will ever be. In my estimation we make too much of worship and too little of discipleship. The purpose of worship should be to equip us and empower us to live as disciples of Christ in the world.

The crowd that wanted to make Jesus king had, on one hand, got it right—Jesus was that great Messianic prophet who would reveal God. But on the other hand, where it really

mattered, they got it all wrong. They wanted the Messiah to be the king they wanted him to be.

The crowd is persistent. After Jesus withdraws from them they look for him and pursue him across the lake of Galilee. When they find him Jesus says to them: “Very truly I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw the signs I performed (that is, not because you saw with spiritual discernment and insight what it is that I am really about), but because you ate the loaves and had your fill.”

They want Jesus to be for them what they want him to be. Times have changed, but we are trapped in the same human condition. We want to make Jesus into what we want him to be. I wonder how much of Christianity is just this—turning Jesus into what we want. He’s the one who guarantees us a place in heaven. He’s the one who makes us successful and fulfilled. He’s the one who will make our marriages a bit of heaven on earth. He’s the answer to all our problems. As I read the New Testament it seems to me that Jesus created as many problems for his followers as he solved. But that’s not what we want. We want Jesus to make us feel good and bring us happiness as we define it.

I think it was John Ortburg who talked about standing in line in McDonald’s with his small children. They all wanted happy meals and he tried to talk them out of it. He was fed up with the whole happy meal experience. He told them that if they would eat from the menu he would take them afterwards and get them a real toy. They wanted nothing to do with it and started chanting in line: “We want a Happy Meal. We want a Happy Meal.” He said the lady in front of them gave him a disgusted look thinking, “Get your kids a happy meal you cheapskate.”

We are just big kids. The only difference is that our “Happy Meals” have become more sophisticated and grown-up sounding. We don’t need Jesus to give us what we desire; we need Jesus to reorder and reshape our desires, to teach us what to desire. Our desires are far too easily manipulated by advertising, political propaganda, social pressure from friends or colleagues, the American dream and way of life—all of which can be nothing more than catering to our own ego and personal ambitions.

This isn’t a new problem or a particular one—it’s a universal problem, one that lies in every human heart. We all have a propensity to take our God-given desires for good things—for food, beauty, sex, knowledge, relationships, work, leisure, security, and self-value and turn them into addictions, to wrap them in distortions and delusions, to be absorbed by them and consumed by them. We go from moderation to excess and become enslaved to our desires—even resorting to violence and destructive behavior to get and keep what we want and think we can’t live without.

Jesus says, “Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you.” When the crowd asks, “What must we do to do the works of God?” Jesus says, “The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent.”

In this context this does not mean: Believe some doctrine about the Christ. It means: Believe or trust in what Christ is telling you about authentic human existence, about true life. The way to real life, eternal life, life that is lived in relationship and partnership with God is not what you think. Jesus is saying: “Trust me. I know”

The response of the crowd is: What sign will you perform? You see, they still don't get it. They want a sign that Jesus is the answer to what they think they need. What they don't realize is that Jesus is the true bread from heaven who gives real life, authentic life, God's kind of life to the world.

If we fail to be Jesus' disciples, if we fail to draw our nourishment from Jesus and learn from his life and teachings, if we fail to let him reorder our desires and needs, if we fail to participate in his life of love and compassion for the world, then we are no different than the crowd in this Gospel story. We can get it right, but where it really counts, we can get it all wrong.

Lord, show what we really need, not just what we think we need. Teach us to discern those wants and desires that originate from our ego and our selfish ambitions and passions. Help us to see that the important thing is not what we feel when we worship Christ, but what we do and how we live everyday as we follow Christ. Inspire us and empower to be faithful disciples of Jesus. Expand our faith, enlarge our hope, and most of all, may the love of Christ fill our hearts and abound more and more issuing forth into many good works. Amen.