

Sermon  
Ninth Sunday after Pentecost  
July 25, 2021

John 6:1-21

We all go through times in life when we ask ourselves, who am I? I am Heidi; daughter, wife, mother, student, teacher, fundraiser, auntie, grandmother, volunteer, occasional preacher at Living Faith Lutheran Church and so on. Some of those roles were more chosen than others. Who are you? The question that the author of John's gospel is seeking to answer is who is Jesus?

So who do we say Jesus is? Mary's baby, Joseph's son, Son of God, carpenter, itinerate preacher and teacher, rabbi, friend, healer and the list goes on. And like for you and me, it changes depending on perspective, circumstance, place, time and experience. Who is Jesus? A lifelong and centuries old question we continue to live with. We go to the gospels first to begin the search for that answer.

In the book of John the centrality of Jesus as Christ is most important. This gospel is focussed more on the divinity of Jesus rather than his humanity. Yet, John's author uses the created elements of the earth to point to the divine. The Word made flesh, light and dark, bread and water are all examples. John connects Jesus in Christ, the divine with the ancient story of Israelites and the created cosmos. In this Sunday's reading from John we have heard two stories: the feeding of the 5000 and Jesus walking on the water. In the gospel of John both work toward answering the question; who is Jesus?

The people have seen signs, Jesus has healed. A chapter earlier he has healed the Roman official's son, He has healed, on the Sabbath no less, the invalids lying by the pool of Bethzatha in Jerusalem. A man even got up, picked up his mat and walked!! Jesus is an amazing man and the crowd wants more. For all of Jesus' teaching and healing they still don't

understand. The crowds are desperate for more healing and signs and the authorities are suspicious and certainly not warming up to this Jesus from Nazareth who is disturbing the peace.... as they see it. Jesus knows what the people need, this crowd of persistent followers who follow, follow, follow, these poor people who have nothing, living in the chaos of the Roman occupation. They follow him to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. He has even gone up the mountain, a secluded hill to be with his disciples and the crowd persists.

Jesus knows now that the crowd needs food and says to Philip, really knowing full well what will happen, "Where are we going to buy bread for these people to eat?" That's absurd mutters Philip, we can imagine, not even six months of wages is going to cover what we need here. Not to mention the logistics of contacting the baker and getting bread out here. It's crazy, Jesus. In the meantime Andrew sees a young boy with five barley loaves and a couple of dried fish, really it was poor people's food, not the finest available, but he points it out to Jesus anyway. "That will do." Jesus says gently. This, the disciples must think, is just as absurd as trying to buy bread. Jesus interrupts their head shaking and says, "There's lots of space and even grass here. Make the people sit down. It is better to sit and eat and be with one another to share food." And Jesus gave thanks for the bread and the fish and gave it to all and they had their fill, "as much as they wanted" with abundant leftovers!

This story in John contains an echo of the Exodus story and is alluded to in the comment that it was near the festival of Passover. Moses led the Israelites through the wilderness; they were fed manna, bread from heaven. It was provided daily, for only that day except on the sixth day they were provided enough for the seventh, the Sabbath. Once they reached border of Canaan this rationed provision from heaven ended. John sees Jesus, in part, as one in the line of prophets, those who over millennia have been the mouth pieces, connectors, liaisons and voices of God to the people. And the good Jewish folk of the day would have heard over and over the stories of the prophets and now see Jesus as one among them. Yet there is something different, something more. Unlike the

strange manna from heaven that God gave the Israelites that was limited day by day, the barley loaves, these three, every-day, homemade rough loaves yielded abundantly beyond what can be consumed in one sitting. Enough to take back to the town for others! Abundance!

This barley bread is probably made with water, roughly ground barley flour, salt and natural yeast maybe from a beer like concoction. Bread is, in its most basic form, grain and salt, elements from the earth, water, yeast, the spores of which are present in the very air we breathe, human hands and heat. It feeds and nourishes, abundantly. Jesus was not bound by the limitations of economy (six months wages) or of status (a child) or the simplicity of food (the bread) to be compassionate and reveal abundance.

Who is Jesus? For the people who lived in poverty he was the one who fed them – real bread, barley loaves and dried fish that really satisfied the body. Jesus is the one who really cares that our very human needs are fulfilled, he is compassion. Jesus knows, deeply, that God has provided everything, in creation, that we need. We have enough – abundance.

But our reading doesn't end there. No, now the people, energized and amazed want to make this prophet their king. "Let's get him!" they might have shouted. "Here's a prophet who will make a great king who will make sure we will have jobs, houses, and food to put on our tables. He will make sure healthcare is equally available to all, not just the rich." But Jesus leaves them all, disciples included and fled back to the mountain alone.

I feel like here's a pause. The people, dismayed, weary now are turning back to start the walk toward home. Jesus has disappeared, maybe to pray, to just be with God in the quiet and solitude of a small cave or beside a shading tree. The disciples are puzzled and overwhelmed by this whole event and can't see Jesus anywhere. Having waited for him and together debriefed the day's happenings, finally, in the gathering darkness push off in their boats to cross the sea back to Capernaum.

In the midst of their journey back the seas get rough and the winds are strong. They know winds and waves come up quickly on this sea. But it's so disorienting and chaotic in the darkness. It is really frightening! We're in the boat with the disciples, these men familiar with the ways of the sea and are now so frightened. Tired, wind and water-filled eyes straining to see the shore now see Jesus, walking on the water, coming toward them. They are now not just frightened but terrified. Then they hear, "It is I; do not be afraid." God said to Moses by the burning bush, I AM. God is. God is present. They like the crowds wanted to grab him to themselves and put him in their boat. And then....the boats gently bumped onto home shores.

When juxtaposed, placed side by side in this reading from John, the two stories provide light into our own needs, expectations, encounters, and interpretations.

How often is it that people "come after" Jesus because of the signs? If Jesus can heal children and the blind, the lame and paralyzed and can give us bread, maybe he can give us even more. How quickly we need and want for only ourselves, forgetting that there are 12 baskets of leftovers to be delivered to the poor left behind. Jesus cares both, that our needs are met and that we to care for one another.

How often is it, though, that all someone needs is a simple reassurance that, Jesus the Christ, God is present. "I AM. Do not be afraid." That presence can get the boat to shore, can calm the greatest of fears.

Bread is sustenance and a symbol that tells us that everything we need God has provided. Jesus acted in order to show who he is. Jesus responded to the needs of the hungry crowd and the perplexed and frightened disciples. Jesus is active through both miracle and simple presence, through everyday realities and extraordinary experience.

Who is Jesus? I leave that with you....

Amen