

**GOD GETTING WHAT GOD WANTS; JOHN 6:1-21; JULY 29, 2018;  
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The committee that selects the biblical lessons for the year has put down the Gospel of Mark and picked up for our summer reading – the Gospel of John which we'll be consulting these coming weeks.

It would be like putting down an English novel, and starting up a Harry Potter book. Jesus in the Gospel of John is a gravity-defying superhero. He reads people's minds, foresees the future and performs miracles.

Today, this miracle-working savior who multiplies loaves and fishes and walks on water teaches the disciples an important lesson – not to underestimate his power, or forget his presence with them as head of the church.

A few weeks ago I asked the question, "What Are We Doing Here?" The question was directed to us individually, in our increasingly technical, functional world where humans are more confined and defined by what they do rather than exploring who and why they are which are the classic catalysts for wonder and awe.

My conclusion was that God calls us to be human beings, not human doings. We are made in the image of God, endowed with moral conscience, called to use our gifts for the common good and thus reveal the glory of the Creator.

The question I want to ask this morning is the same – What are we doing here? But I want to direct the question to the church – to the idea of a congregation and to this congregation in particular.

In the wake of a generation of decline, the Christian church, in general, has been as busy as Proctor and Gamble repackaging a laundry detergent.

We can say the church has been so intent selling itself it has lost sight of what one management guru calls the 'main thing', that is, its *raison d'être*.

Being deflected from the main thing is what leads to the downfall of any organization; losing sight of specific mission and purpose starts an unraveling process. Starbucks called its former CEO back to lead the company and reconnect with its founding vision.

Remember that iconic television commercial for one of the fast food chains? A frail and feisty woman in her 90s, wearing a flowered hat, chomps down into the competitor's burger and with an annoyed and angry look asks, "Where's the beef?"

It's true. McDonald's lost sight of the main thing – the burger; they got off track building playgrounds at their stores, giving away toys with food orders.

As far back as the 60's H. Richard Niebuhr had a similar critique for the church; he sounds like the disappointed lady looking for the beef, "the Protestant church in America lost its way" Niebuhr said, "a God without wrath, brought people without sin into a Kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ with out a Cross." Jewish scholar Abraham Heschel said you can't blame the culture for the decline of religion; organized religion is the cause of its own decline.

Niebuhr's prophetic observation was made when the church faced a fork in the road: when it chose the path of social justice, rather than the other great mission of the church: to win followers for Jesus.

Hindsight is 20-20 of course; the progressive church was reacting more to the aggressive, simplistic, culturally insensitive message of the evangelical church that for its part had forsaken social justice; and, almost as if to say, 'we are not *that* church' liberal Christians gave up on the project of a personal, existential commitment to Jesus for a new litmus test: being on the correct side of the emerging culture wars – the battlefield of which was politics.

The other factors were the shift to a more secular society when Sunday morning, once reserved for church, was now like Saturday morning – useful for shopping, sports or getting a jump on the workweek; and, changing demographics as people moved to the suburbs and the racial, ethnic makeup of urban neighborhoods changed; the result is that many mainline churches rather than reaching out to their new neighbors circled the wagons, closed the doors during the week and opened for limited hours on Sunday.

To its credit, the evangelical church has embraced what was once the domain of the liberal progressive church: outreach to struggling neighborhoods, communities and even nations decimated by natural disaster or civil war. Jericho Rd. is a case in point – an evangelical medical mission here in Buffalo, with three African locations that serves thousands of adults and children each year.

But the mainline church has been slow to embrace the great commission the Risen Christ gives at the end of the gospel of Matthew: to make disciples and to nurture and deepen our understanding of God and to remember that God is with us in this communal venture called the church.

It is not uncommon to experience in mainline churches a certain imitation of evangelical worship – rock bands, video screens, and what J. Crew calls that 'cultivated casual' look. The mainline church has struggled to give its own expression to the Great Commission.

But we may find some comfort knowing that we are in the company of Jesus' first followers today. The story of the feeding of the 5,000 is found in all four gospels but John gives it his own twist. That Jesus meets the physical needs of the crowds prevents the story from being interpreted as some ethereal metaphor for spirituality.

This Jesus understands hunger and feeds the people. But then the crowd, having witnessed Jesus' power want to make him king – a moment unique to John's telling of this story. So Jesus retreats and eludes their attempt to make him in their own image and use him for their own purposes.

While Jesus wants our attention, he rejects our attempts to fit him into small categories that limits his role in our lives. He comes on his own terms. In contrast to the crowds' recognition of his power is the disciples' failure to recognize the power of Jesus at the beginning of the story as they face thousands of hungry people and Jesus asks how they will feed the multitude and the disciples are dumbfounded.

If we fail to realize he is not just an itinerant rabbi, albeit a radical one, who is among us but the living God, then our expectation for who we are and what we can accomplish as the church will be limited to the linear boundaries of reason stripped of faith which is of course the animating ingredient for change and transformation.

And this is why Jesus appears to the disciples walking on the water. After the supper the disciples go to the shore of the lake, get into a boat and make their way to the other side. But the sky grows dark, a wind kicks up and waves begin slapping the boat. I've been on the Sea of Galilee in a boat like the first century vessel the disciples were in; the situation can change on a dime and waves start pounding the boat as it did when we were there a few years ago.

That's when the disciples see Jesus coming to them on the water. He says to them "It is I. Do not be afraid"; but some translators say it is better rendered "I am. Do not be afraid" – evoking God's response to Moses at the burning bush when Moses asks, "Who shall I say sent me?" Now that *same voice* that transformed Moses from a 19 year old keeper of his father-in-law's sheep to a mighty leader who negotiates with and thwarts Pharaoh, that same voice is speaking to the disciples.

John gives Jesus the voice of the God who called Moses; Jesus is more than a prophet; more than a worker of wonders. He is God with us, God present to us, God who comes out on the waves and in the midst of the wind to embrace and save us.

Then John tells us "they wanted to take Jesus into the boat and just then the boat reached the land where they were heading." The boat in Christian antiquity represents the church. What John is telling us is that the disciples want Jesus to be with them in the church, especially when the wind kicks up and the sky is dark (as it surely was for the church to which John is writing). So Jesus appears and goes with them; but along with Jesus in their midst comes a new and deeper understanding of who Jesus is and who God is.

What I'm saying is that this is the 'main thing' of the church; the reason we are here; the one thing we do that no other institution does; (and woe unto us if we lose sight of or forget the reason for our existence); we are to be with, listen to, learn from and worship Jesus as Lord, as God with us, as the great I Am.

We live in a time of red and blue politics and evangelical and progressive theology, yet we split our nation and church at the risk of limiting who we are and what we are called to do.

It's gotten so bad that not only do our separate sides fail to work together, we fail to engage with and even try to understand one another; which ultimately leads, as it must when you live in a silo without honest debate, compromise and collaboration, according to John Stuart Mill the great moral philosopher, to our failure to fully understand *ourselves*.

I say this because we progressives have allowed our aversion to being perceived as 'evangelical' and evangelicals' have allowed their aversion to being perceived as 'progressive' to keep us from embracing the fullness of our ministry as the church of Jesus Christ.

Last week Marcia Buhl asked me in a light moment in her sermon if we still believed in the 'seven deadly sins' – assuming perhaps that I would say 'No, of course not!'

But I replied the seven deadly sins are foundational to our understanding of human nature – pride, greed, lust, envy, gluttony, wrath and sloth – anyone who claims to be free of these abuses of our natural faculties is, the Book of Common Worship says, 'self-deceived and a stranger to the truth.'

Yet, we are reluctant to use words like 'sin' and to presume, in this day and age that celebrates and worships the individual that we are broken creatures.

But I can assure us this morning – we can march for social justice until the cows come home and we will still be broken creatures.

Peruse the front page of today's newspaper and you will see pride, greed, lust, envy, gluttony, wrath and sloth illustrated from the Oval Office to Main Street. Why should we think it doesn't exist or that those words are too harsh to name it; and why shrink from confronting it?

Jesus Christ commissioned the church to rescue sinners – a phrase the Gospel of John likes and uses elsewhere. If we deny that commission because we do not trust in power of God to transform human lives or because we are frightened of being perceived as members of a group we find distasteful then we do nothing more but make the church indistinguishable from a social service agency or the Rotary Club that at least meets on a convenient day and serves lunch.

I'm not saying progressives have to become evangelicals or evangelicals have to become progressives. But I am saying we have something to learn from each other.

The kind of self-examination that I heard around the table in our summer Case Library series discussing the book *Waking Up White* is moving in the right direction. Not self-flagellation. But an honest peeling back of the layers of pride and self-importance and investing in image that prevents us from seeing our need for Jesus as Lord and Savior.

We're no different than those first disciples. Some of us think Jesus is our friend or that he is a teacher of spiritual wisdom, or a worker of wonders who can help us escape whatever fix we find our selves in. He is all of that, but he is more. He is as much of God as we ever hope to see in this world. Not just a spokesperson for God, but God with us; not just the one who points to God, but the one who is God. The one who makes us whole and well again.

If we teach little Hayden whom we baptized this morning anything, let us make sure we teach him that! Amen.