

This Believing is Work

Sunday, August 1st, 2021

Sermon by Dawn Jefferson at TriCon Church on Zoom

John 6:24-35

Will you pray with me?

God, your ways are past finding out and yet you continue to be accessible, moving ever nearer to be in relationship with us. We pray that you would guide us on this journey, that you would temper our appetites to appreciate your presence as much if not more than your blessings. Help us in our unbelief as we grow to trust you more. In Jesus' name I pray, Amen.

Friends, I have found this morning's scripture in John so fascinating. In particular, it is yet another moment that follows some big events in the life of Jesus and his ministry. Within the gospel of John this 6th chapter starts off with the miracle of the feeding of the multitude, followed by Jesus' walking on water. So, yeah, it's been a big week here. Big enough, impactful enough that "The Crowd," as they are known, are seeking Jesus out rather intentionally and persistently.

And in reviewing the persistence of this crowd, my first question for us this morning is:

How much are WE Seeking Jesus?

There's a lot going on in this text, and I like to try to consider less of the Hollywood narrative version of these stories, less about blame, and imagine real people more often. People, like us. Real people don't move as a crowd for no reason. I've worked with lots of teenagers and church folk, and I can say that hungry people have a certain way that they move towards the promise of food. So, I'm trying to picture that kind of hunger and that kind of motivation.

Also, I'm imagining Jesus. While Jesus is accessible, he also has established some boundaries in the text. For all intents and purposes, you could say, he was on a sabbatical and had gone to Capernaum for a day to get away from the crowds, and yet. Here they are...

The text in verse 24 says that the crowd makes some decisions; they came looking for Jesus and his disciples. Since neither were around, "THEY THEMSELVES" got into the boats and went to Capernaum, so far as I can tell the distance between Bethsaida, the location of the feeding of the 5000, and Capernaum is about 5 miles. They technically crossed the Sea of Galilee to get from point A to point B.

Sure, we can say that we are already Christians, already believers, but I wonder how much effort we are putting into getting to know Jesus even more. I spend a lot of time discussing church work and church people. I spend a lot of time praying for people too. If, I put a time tracker on how much time I take out of my day to find more of Christ, I might end up lacking. Reading this text is inspiring me to

check in on some things. First, how much I am reading about Christ, the Gospel, justice and faith. How much I am experiencing my relationship with Jesus, not just people around him? Also, how convenient is my faith life to me? Would I, do I go out of my way in search of opportunities to be with or serve Christ? These people got on a boat and went 5 miles. I know I’ve driven farther for a good meal or to visit loved ones. Metaphorically, how far would you go?

It’s just an important first step to consider...how much out of our way do we go to understand, to perceive or to pursue the reality of Jesus Christ in our lives? Now that I have the internet, I can watch more sermons, I can research more things and expose myself to different kinds of faithful testimonies. I could, but do I?

Second Question...

Which Jesus are you Chasing?

Are you after the Son of the Living God, the guy who preached those really good parable sermons, or that man from Nazareth who hosted a free picnic in the meadow last week? This scripture text invites us to reflect on the personhood of Christ in a different way. Particularly, we understand how much Christ means to us in Christ’s death and crucifixion, we in fact celebrate that very sacrifice in remembrance when we take communion together, but that is not quite the Jesus here in verse 27. Here, he refers to himself as the “food that endures for eternal life.” Here, he is not just the redeemer, he is everlasting nourishment.

Jesus is not chastising as much as he is challenging and inviting the crowd and the disciples to review and reconsider why it is they are seeking Jesus and what it is he's actually offering them.

Also, Christ is not asking people to go hungry. He is challenging us to check in on whether we would believe beyond our being full. That applies to every one of us - the hungry and the self-satisfied.

Jesus hopes that the crowd will get what they need and realize what more they need. Christ references the wilderness in verse 31 because the problem with the Israelites was that they did not appreciate that God had more than manna to give them. The disciples and the crowd make a faux pas here, but Jesus tries to redirect them. It's not that they shouldn't be hungry and seek out bread. Jesus makes himself proximate to food. Proximate to bread and communion, proximate to fish and wells, proximate to wine and healing. Jesus is always right next to what you need.

Jesus expects you to be hungry, but he doesn't expect you to rely on the food. There is a next step. A next part of the journey. A Capernaum, another part of this relationship. God is leading us on to the next junction. Beckoning us beyond the bread, beyond our very real hunger toward the satisfaction of our inner person the true state of being full.

Even as you are looking for a better job, a different friend group, a romantic relationship. Even as you search out these things to feel purposeful, desired, valued, there is even more that God has to nourish and feed you. God does not deny us the opportunity to be physically fed, but that is not all there is. When we depend on God

merely for provision and providence, we have not truly valued all of God. Often we get distracted by the manna – “WOW God is feeding me. God is providing for me, so God loves me”. Providing for you is just the beginning. God is offering God’s self to us in Jesus Christ.

Third Question: How does this valuing show up in your other relationships?

I spent my childhood summers in Queens with my grandmother. Many memories of her are related to food, but that was not why I loved sitting with that woman. She would get fresh warm peanuts and we would crack the shells, one by one and bite into that warm goodness. Or she would bring a couple of mangoes out into the front room. And right there by the window, she would slice that mango right along the seed. You could see the stringy mango separate and drip with juice. I felt loved by her helping me discover the flavor of good food. Watching her make food, spending time with her as she told stories, even sitting with her in silence are profound divine memories. I adored my grandmother, not just because she cooked every meal for me, but because she loved me through food. Sometimes I ate her meals as a sign of how much I loved her back.

We all want to be respected and valued. None of us wants to feel like part of a capitalist transaction. We want to be seen and understood. We hope that people choose to be near and around us for who we are, not for what we provide. And so, in the middle of the summer, in the same way that Jesus took a break and caused his

followers to reflect, so should we to take stock in our relationships. In both directions, who do we need for what they give us and who do we spend time with because we delight in them? Also, who is investing in you or prioritizing you, not just because you treat them to dinner or lunch or because you give them a ride... Who would choose to be near, around you just because, no strings attached, no breadcrumbs lain...

This does not mean you need to cut yourself off from folks who are transactional, perhaps just be realistic with yourself about it. Just call it what it is, the way that Jesus does here. Jesus knows that he is surrounded by hungry people. He is intentionally proximate to impoverished and hungry people. He is inviting them to consider that he has much more than sandwiches for them.

But is also a kind of awkward thing to never confess the benefits of relationship, like how much God is a part of our lives. It will always be weird if God is a kind of secret affair that you never tell anyone about because you're afraid they'll think you're trying to convert them. When you have a really close friend, most people who hang around you meet that friend. Why shouldn't the people proximate to you know that you're not JUST grateful that God is blessing you, but that you also love God because of the time you spend in devotion or prayer or worship. That the robin red breast that landed on your lawn yesterday was God smiling at you.

Jesus causes us to consider why are we in relationship with anyone really? Is it because of what they bring or do?? How they serve our needs or “feed us”? Or are we in relationship with them for who

they are? And, of course, who they are is wrapped up in what they do. But if they stopped “doing it”? What would be our next step or response?

Our communities are so invested in capitalist mechanisms it is sometimes hard to do the work of discerning and reflection that help us revise our positions and perspectives. But we need to. We need to check in on why we’re in the boat - of any relationship, group, church family even. Are we here just for what we give or what we get or for who the Spirit of God shows up as? Are we in the relationship for the right reasons, because that person’s divinity fills us up.

Our Final Question:

So, what must we do to perform the works of God?

This is the question the crowd asks Jesus in verse 28....

The term “Work of God” in this text is interesting. It’s a phrase that both Jesus and the crowd use but it seems clear that they both mean different things when they say “Work of God.” It can mean miracle; it can mean faithful service.

But what I think that Jesus means is more. Mostly that he is referring to himself as the “pièce de résistance.” That Christ is himself THEE WORK of GOD. The work that Jesus is performing is BEING GOD. And that The WORK OF God is God’s work alone. Not mine, not the church’s even. This is one of those texts that doesn’t really let you get away without dealing with Jesus. You can’t get off

the hook here. There is no way to get around Jesus in the book of John.

Christ says, THIS IS the work of God. And so much can get lost in translation of merely reading. When I engage the text, I imagine more of a drama that demonstrates action. I imagine a Jesus who is pointing directly to himself, when he says THIS. It’s a demonstrative pronoun. This is the work of God! I am the work of God, says Christ. My very presence and incarnation is God’s own work.

Still, the people ask for another sign, more instruction for what they should do to perform the work of God. The disciples weirdly respond again about miracles or ask what they can perform. Clearly, they can’t make an incarnate Jesus the way that God already has. Perhaps they just want the recipe for man-made miracles. But there is no such a recipe. And so, they must depend on God. We must depend on God for God’s work.

IN this way, we as believers cannot actually DO the work of God, we can merely believe in God’s work that is Christ. There is less doing again. We are always so eager to work and to do our way into something. Trying to prove ourselves through our actions can sometimes be useful, but in relationships there is a power of presence and being. Of believing.

The answer to the crowd’s question “what must we do to perform the works of God?: The answer is that Believing is Your Work
And it isn’t easy. Life experience doesn’t always make it easy to believe. But these people know how to press. They demonstrate

that they know how to find what they want and need. Their faith moves them to where they need to be. They don't in fact just find Jesus at the synagogue or where they first saw him. No, they get in boats and cross the sea to go to Capernaum. They are surprised to find him there, but they took effort and initiative and went searching. We can take this same effort in faith. It is not easy to live in this world and believe in God. There is so much unbelief. There is also so much pain and despair and wondering where God is. There was pain in the time of Christ. There was death and exploitation, there were empirical forces of oppression, enslavement, colonial greed, all kinds of power at play then - physical and spiritual. There were evil forces all around Jesus plotting his actual murder. Still. He is asking these hungry people who traveled across miles for food to believe in him also.

So, yes, believing is hard. Perhaps it's hard for you believe that rehab is going to work this time, perhaps it feels ludicrous to believe that healing is possible for your loved one. Perhaps it even feels silly for you to imagine that your situation is going to change for the better. Believing is entrusting yourself in the truth that someone else offers. Believing is trusting in another's care.

I don't know about you, but there are some people who I will let drive me around. I tend to be the driver of my friends, happy to pick you up if we're going somewhere. And there is a level of trust when you let someone else drive you somewhere. But there's a whole other level of trust when you let yourself go to sleep with someone else driving. **That** is what I think when I think of entrusting and believing.

Jesus is not asking us to join a church, be on a committee or even feed the homeless here. This conversation is not so much about the mission of the church as it is the disposition of believers. And I do wonder sometimes what churches would actually be if every member were a believer like this. Not as much a follower of religion or someone who thinks the creeds are true, but someone who entrusts themselves to the Divine.

With the Olympics...there is a certain awe in watching professional and gifted athletes complete major feats. Sure, there is a bit of anxiety and even some nervous feelings when witnessing dangerous physical movements. But, when you know you're watching someone phenomenal, there is a bit more trust that they're foot will land just so, they're shoulders will surely pass across the finish line first or their foot will place the ball just into the net. It's beautiful, majestic. We are entrusting another person's mastery of their own body of physical space.

Similarly, there is a faithful leap here in believing in God. A leap into the unknown, intangible familiar when speaking of Jesus and the Spirit and God. We are to watch and participate with them as the masterfully move as deity and God, unnameable force of the universe, all-knowing friend. As they manipulate infinity and handle the universe, as they align our lives or dispel chaos, we are to entrust ourselves to them.

But this belief entails work. It entails a commitment proven by our actions and trust, our following and chasing, even our sentiments of

preparing and living in the present. The one who entrusts themselves to God will be doing God’s work, believing is a miracle in and of itself.

We do not center Christ so that we can do anything or get anything. We center Christ because that’s where Christ belongs as God’s best work. And this believing is work for sure. This work is worth it; This work is enough to make us full.

Amen.

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