

NB: I'll be on vacation with my family this week. Frank Jones is leading worship next Sunday.

As God Is My Teacher

Sermon by Jan Wiersma

Community Presbyterian Church - Rochester, Minnesota

11th Sunday after Pentecost - August 8, 2021

Texts: Ephesians 4:25-5:2, John 6:35, 41-51

Ephesians 4:25-5:2

So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil. Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labor and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy. Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

John 6:35, 41-51

Still working from the sign of feeding a crowd of 5000, Jesus goes farther in offering himself as the bread of life. Those who hear continue to misunderstand his true origin and purpose. Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." Then the Jews began to complain about him because he said, "I am the bread that came down from heaven." They were saying, "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, 'I have come down from heaven'?" Jesus answered them, "Do not complain among yourselves. No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me; and I will raise that person up on the last day. It is written in the prophets, 'And they shall all be taught by God.' Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me. Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father. Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."

Remember Harry? Back in the Great Recession when he was having financial difficulties he broke down and went to church. He actually prayed. "God, help me! I need to win the lottery now!" A week passed. No win. The next week, Harry's back in church. "Listen, God! I know you can fix this! If I don't win the lottery, my wife will leave me!" Nothing. Next week, Harry's back again. "God, aren't you listening? This is your last chance! If I don't win the lottery this week, I'm ruined." And a voice: "Harry, Harry, this is God. I want to help you, Harry, but you have to work with me on this. Harry. Buy the ticket!"

Apparently, our old friend Harry is back. I heard he was in church the last couple of weeks moaning, "God, I need help! It's this pandemic: son's out of work, grandkids' school's back online, more mask mandates. God, you have to keep my family safe from this covid mess." And - surprise - God responds again. "Harry, Harry, I want to help you, but you have to work with me on this. Harry, get the vaccine!"

Please pray with me. Great Provider, all that we ever really need is available to us. Your ears are always open to our prayers and your hands are always open to give us what we truly need. Feed us with the bread of eternal life here and now, so we may feed our brothers and sisters, in your name. Amen

Sometimes it takes awhile for the penny to drop, for the truth to click. Sometimes it never does. Sometimes, people's expectations are so tightly held they can't let go of them. And when expectations are dashed, people get irritated. You know the definition of "expectation," right? An expectation is a premeditated resentment. Anger is different. In simple terms, anger springs from one of two things: either a real or perceived threat to self or loved ones, or unmet expectations. Anger itself can be a worthy emotion: wholesome and helpful. Bad stuff happens. Sometimes people do bad stuff on purpose. Anger helps us name it and confront it. It's when anger is swallowed, suppressed, denied, or unheard that it turns to resentment, and resentment turns ugly.

Jesus knew this. That's why he kept harping on this bread of life thing to people who persisted in misunderstanding, who clung to their expectations of a Messiah who would solve their problems just the way they wanted. A Messiah who wasn't the son of Joe and Mary down the street. Their unmet expectations went beyond anger and resentment to mob violence, with Jesus on a cross, his mother and the women weeping, and his disciples scattered. We've heard that story.

But have we really heard the bread of life story yet? How does it answer our needs now, today? I'll tell you what I was expecting a month ago. I was *so* looking forward to clearing the masks out of my car, hugging everyone indiscriminately, shopping in a leisurely fashion, not in laser strikes. OMG, sharing treats after worship. I was not expecting covid transmission to rise to new levels all over again. New mask mandates and new deniers. *Bribing* people in this country to get vaccinated while the majority of people in the majority of the world go begging for shots. They

are dying for the lifeline we're throwing away. This leaves a bitter taste in my mouth. What am I supposed to do with that? Throw a tantrum, kick the table, post a nasty comment on Facebook? That's resentment speaking. Or do I listen when God says, "I want to help you, Jan, but you've got to work with me on this. Try a bite. Taste and see. Test me. Remember how I've always provided before." History counts.

The people John was writing to were Jews. Probably they had risked a lot to follow Jesus, but they weren't sure the risk was worth it anymore. They were afraid of being ostracized, bullied and victimized for following Jesus. It had happened before. But as Jews, the history of God saving them and feeding them in the wilderness was written on their souls. Jesus tells them, "Your ancestors ate the manna and sure, eventually, they died like everyone dies - but as a people, they survived or you wouldn't be here today. Now there's something even better than manna and I'm it, not just for now, but forever."

When will we ever learn? When will the penny drop? Jesus says, there's just one way: we must be drawn by God, taught by God, we must hear and learn from God. Only then can we go of the good we wanted but didn't get, and embrace the good we do get instead. Yes, things change. They always do. *There is nothing permanent except change.* The Greek philosopher Heraclitus said that 500 years before Jesus was born. Accepting change means letting go of expectations, letting God teach us a new way. I believe that church may have to change. Jesus' work wasn't primarily inside the synagogue, or during the Sabbath services. When he did show up at those times and places, what he did scandalized people so much they killed him. He broke their expectations. Maybe he'll break ours, too. The faith will survive. But the changes may be hard. We may need to grieve the things we lose in the change. That's OK. Grief is good work. Maybe mourning the loss of favorite hymns and familiar rituals will channel anger into something helpful, not resentment.

Think back to our reading from Ephesians: "Speak truth to one another, because we are members of one another." The word member means part, as in a part of the body. We're as connected to one another as your nose is connected to your face, as your heart is connected to your lungs. The reading goes on: "Be angry, but don't sin; don't let the sun go down on your anger." In other words, don't let your anger fester into bitterness. He adds a lot of other good advice, like being kind, tender, and forgiving, but, really, being part of each other says it best. We belong to God and we belong to each other. And we are beholden to one another.

In C.S. Lewis's beautiful Narnia stories, where the Gospel is told in parable, people find themselves at the end of time, in Aslan's country - God's country - where a heavenly feast is offered. Only one small group is left out. They're resentful because the arrogant, bullying, incompetent leader they chose to follow has been exposed and deposed. They believe some enemy has shut them away in darkness; they believe the exquisite food they are given is straw

and dung; and still they fight over it. They are locked into some idea of personal freedom. They are locked in a prison of their own minds, their own disbelief, their own failed expectations. They are doomed to misery by their own choice, their failure to taste and see that God is good.

Consider another story: it's made the rounds often and I'm sure you've heard it: a traveler has a chance to visit hell. There he finds a sumptuous banquet spread. But all the guests are fighting and cursing: the forks and spoons are a yard long, and they cannot get the food into their mouths. Then the traveler visits heaven. The scene is the same: the banquet is spread, the guests are assembled, and all the utensils a yard long. Yet everyone is smiling, content, laughing and joyful. What is the difference? They are feeding one another.

We wear masks not just to protect ourselves but to protect each other. We get vaccinated not just to protect ourselves but to protect one another. We cherish and honor the earth not just for our lifetime but for generations still unborn. Doing this is living heaven in the here and now.

Christ is the bread who came down from heaven. He offers himself to you, everything your heart truly desires. Only work with me on this, God says. Take and eat. Taste and see. Then let your hands be the hands that feed and heal the world. Amen. Thanks be to God.

Prayers

We thank you, God, for the life-giving rain feeding the earth here after its long thirst; we pray that other drought-stricken and fire-ravaged areas may also be so blessed.

As covid cases rise again, we lift our concerns for its far reaching effects to you. So many suffer, not just those who have contracted the virus. You have given us the vaccine to help us overcome it; may we be wise enough to use it, and generous enough to share it.

We pray for travelers, for students returning to school and for their teachers, for health care workers, and for those who are out of work; for renters who fear eviction, and for landlords who need to be paid; we pray for our leaders to act decisively and swiftly for the good of all.

We pray for those who are deep in the work of grief, mourning losses that have changed many lives.

In the midst of sorrows, we share our joy that you have never failed to feed and lead and teach us in the past; we share our confidence that you will continue to provide all we need in the future. We pray in Jesus' name and as he taught us, "Our Father...."