

23 August 2015 (13th Sunday After Pentecost/21st Sunday in Ordinary Time)
Lafayette Presbyterian Church
“Our Common Struggle”
John 6:56-69

The greatest obstacle we face in life is the temptation to idolatry. That is not a statement I make lightly. It is no editorial accident that the first words of the Law of Moses, the Ten Commandments, are, “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me.” Therein lies humanity’s greatest challenge, and its greatest struggle: how to keep God alone at the center of life, and before all other claims to power and allegiance. For believers who cast their lot with Jesus Christ, the call to follow Christ in the journey of discipleship applies flesh and blood to those opening words of the Law of Moses. As Christians, we believe that Jesus is the target to which all Scripture points, and thus we see his life, his example, his teaching, his suffering, and his resurrection superimposed over the words of the Law. That flesh and blood presence which stands before us in the pages of the Gospels should make it harder for us to wiggle out of God’s singular call to faithful worship. And yet, we who claim to be Christ’s disciples are often the worst when it comes to multiple gods. We too easily associate other allegiances and alliances—false gods—with the cause of Christ, and then we are surprised when we feel confused about what exactly that cause is.

With today’s Gospel lesson, we reach the end of Jesus’ lengthy teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum about the very core of his identity and ministry. In asserting himself as the bread of life, the bread from heaven, he has adopted the most powerful symbol of God’s deliverance he could have chosen, the manna that appeared on the ground each morning from God’s hand when the Israelites were starving in the wilderness. Jesus has not only identified himself with this divine provision from Israel’s history, he has sought to supplant it. He has told his hearers that the bread of life he offers goes one better than the bread their ancestors ate, for they died. Those who eat of him, he says, will never die. His words, and his insistence when challenged, cause such a stir, even his disciples begin to complain. And that is where we find ourselves at the end of Chapter 6, with Jesus having presented the most significant statement yet of his identity and ministry, and with scores of people who have followed him beginning to drift away. The question for us who seek to understand how he is our common language, our common life, and our common wisdom, is why Jesus persisted in his claim to be the bread of life, even at the cost of alienating the people who were following him. What are we to make of our common struggle to embrace Jesus’ singular claim upon our lives?

Last weekend at our Session Retreat, we discussed a lot of issues, including many of the points and ideas that arose from the small group discussions in May and June. One issue in particular that kept rising to the top of our consideration was that of membership. What does it mean to be a member of a church? What exactly do we require when someone joins this church? On a pretty basic level, church membership boils down to living a committed life as one of Christ’s disciples with others who have made the same commitment. Members of a church are united by the common call each has answered to

follow Christ, and they also share a commitment to each other. In keeping with this understanding, during the retreat, your elders and deacons formed four issue groups that we hope will build up the life of the church. These issue groups will work on restoring trust, strengthening committees, developing relationships, and interpreting the meaning of membership. I ask for your prayers for these groups as they reach out into the congregation and fulfill their purpose, because ultimately, that purpose has everything to do with proclaiming Jesus as the bread of life.

Now, as I have reflected on that great experience we had last weekend at the retreat, I am reminded that this wide-ranging, fruitful discussion about membership and the life of the church is about much more than just getting people through the doors so that we can increase the active roll. If that were all that membership means, we could easily come up with any number of fun activities that would gather people based on common interests and hobbies. But if we did that, wouldn't we be wandering far from Jesus' central, defining claim to be the bread of life for the world? If this church seeks to look like Jesus in its language, life, and wisdom, it must resist the temptation to idolatry. It cannot replace the call to follow Jesus and serve him alone, with some other pretext for bringing people together, no matter how congenial or well intentioned.

As Jesus taught in the synagogue that day in Capernaum, he made a choice that resulted in many disciples leaving him. At some point during his discourse, he solidified his identity and purpose. As he listened to the questions and reactions of the people to his statement, "I am the bread of life," and realized how they were still clinging to manna in the wilderness, he saw them succumbing to the temptation to idolatry. His claim to be the bread of life unmasked their preference for what they were comfortable with, for what they were substituting for a larger vision of life in which God alone was at the center and reigned supreme over all other alliances and loyalties. In their case, it was the idol of tradition, the beloved tradition of the manna—and if it meant giving up that tradition for the eternal bread Jesus was offering, many of them were choosing the old manna, and would just as soon have seen Jesus do the same. But Jesus wanted to call them beyond manna to the God who created them, who had led their ancestors through the wilderness, and who now sought to redeem them. His purpose was to point them to a far greater and closer relationship with God than the memorial to manna could ever reveal.

It is the call to that redeeming relationship with God that defies idolatry, that challenges our false gods, and that unites us in a common struggle. The Apostle Paul portrays this struggle in terms of a warrior arming for battle, as the passage from Ephesians expresses so vividly, even though the "weapons" are anything but warlike: truth, righteousness, peace, faith, and salvation. In his understanding, those qualities given to us by the Spirit of God help us to remain centered on the one God to whom we belong, and to resist any other competing claims on our loyalties or allegiance. As Joshua prepared to lead the Israelites toward the conquest of Canaan, he sought to equip them with the same centered commitment to the one God who had given them the promise of the covenant and led their ancestors out of slavery. He knew that the path ahead of them would be difficult, and that they would have to struggle against the temptation to adopt other gods—which is why he paused to review with them their

history, and then bade them choose whom they would serve. In John Chapter 6, Jesus pinpoints the struggle we share in common, the struggle against the idol of tradition, of placing what we know before what we would know of the fullness of God.

It may seem strange to characterize the importance of the spiritual community and the meaning of membership in terms of a struggle against idolatry. But that struggle is quite real, and it is why we need each other in order to prevail against it. I was quite taken this past week with President Carter as he candidly reflected upon his cancer diagnosis, and how he felt about it. But I was equally taken with what other people remarked about his sense of grace, his feeling of being at ease with whatever comes, his gratitude for a rich and full life, his faith, and his intention to be teaching Sunday School today. Even a hardened cynic like Bill Maher noted wistfully that he wished he had that sense of peace. Diane Rehm described Jimmy Carter as “a beautiful man.” Steve Kornacki observed that, while he may not have been our most effective President, if more of our Presidents were like Jimmy Carter in character and integrity, we would certainly all be better off. People know an authentic witness to the living God when they see it. But the only way to be an authentic witness is to be connected with other believers in our common struggle, as well as in our common language, our common life, and our common wisdom. The stronger that connection is, the more authentic our witness will be as the bread of life for a starving world.

In the wake of Jesus’ “difficult teaching” in the synagogue at Capernaum, as former disciples drifted away to pursue other less offensive callings, Jesus asked his twelve closest disciples whether they, too, wanted to go away. It is Peter who asks in response, “To whom can we go? Who else has the words of eternal life?” And when he names Jesus “the Holy One of God,” he is thereby identifying him with the God of Abraham, of Moses, of Joshua—the one God whom alone we worship and serve. To follow Christ’s call is to place that allegiance above all others: above all national and political loyalties, above all family loyalties, above all the things we surround ourselves with, above all the sometimes misguided goals we set for ourselves that don’t have anything to do with God’s love and purposes. This day, whom will you serve? What idols might be obscuring the vision of eternal life to which God is calling you? Our greatest connection as a community of faith is the one we share that builds us up and strengthens our commitment to Christ as the bread of life. And when we make that commitment to Christ’s singular claim on our life in relationship with others, we become partners in a common struggle that teaches us, equips us, and conforms us ever closer to the image of Christ.



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