



Westminster Presbyterian Church

Richard Baker - March 5, 2017 Sermon

The Dearest Freshness Deep Down Things

John 6 (selected verses)

“The world is charged with the grandeur of God; there lives the dearest freshness, deep down things.” So wrote the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, and he was right. I just wished I lived in his world. Oh, of course, I do—it is God’s world, our world, but too often I am oblivious to God’s grandeur, God’s presence in our world. I’m too pulled into myself, too locked in my accustomed ways of seeing and understanding—or *not* seeing and *not* understanding—to be aware of, to be alive to, God in our world.

I’m not alone in this: some of the great figures of the Bible were likewise oblivious to God. Jacob wrestles all night with God, unaware that it’s God he’s wrestling with. Abraham and Sarah entertain God under the oaks at Mamre and for the longest time just don’t see God as God. Manoah and his wife, the parents of Samson, same thing. And most famously, the two disciples of Jesus walk all the way to Emmaus with the risen Jesus on the evening of the first Easter Sunday, with the risen Jesus teaching them about how the Messiah—and these disciples had thought Jesus was the Messiah—how the Messiah had to die and be raised up on the third day in accordance with Scripture—it’s a seven-mile walk, a three-hour seminar—and Jesus is talking about himself—and still they don’t recognize him. They invite him back to their house, and *still* they don’t recognize him. It is only at the meal at the end of the day, in the breaking of the bread, only in Jesus’ breaking of bread—that they recognize him, and then—snap!—just like that, he’s gone!

In a fog. James Kugel, the Bible scholar, says that most of the time, when it comes to God, we human beings are in a fog. We just don’t see God in our world. It’s not that God is far from our world: as Kugel puts it, God “stands just behind the curtain of the everyday world.” Nor is the everyday world devoid of signs or traces of God—as Hopkins says, it is alight with, alive with, afire with God’s grandeur, God’s presence. Nor is it that God never crosses into this world; God does, witness the Bible stories I just mentioned. As Kugel puts it, “God does not dwell in the abstractions of omniscience and omnipresence; instead God is right there ready to enter and cross over into the human sphere, though unrecognized.”

“God does not dwell in the abstractions of omniscience and omnipresence; instead God is right there ready to enter and cross over into the human sphere, though unrecognized.” It’s a beautiful sentence, and today I would offer only one small amendment:

“God does not dwell in the abstractions of omniscience and omnipresence; instead God is right *here*, at the communion table, ready to enter and cross into the human sphere, though unrecognized.”

Right here in the bread and the wine (and yes, the juice too), God is ready to enter and cross into the human sphere, though unrecognized.

“Though unrecognized,” aye, there’s the rub. And the humor, too, especially in John’s Gospel.

“Written so that you might believe and, by believing, have life.” That’s the reason John gives for wri-

ting his Gospel. The rub—and the humor—is that believing does not always come from seeing (at least not physical seeing). What we see throughout John's Gospel is a whole series of people who see Jesus (sort of) but don't really see Jesus (fully) and therefore don't believe—or at least believe as deeply as they might. And as we see some of them go through the process of seeing more fully and so coming to believe more deeply, so, as readers, do we.

You can see it right near the beginning of John's Gospel (Chapters 3 and 4) with Nicodemus talking with Jesus at night, and the Samaritan woman talking with Jesus at the well next day, mid-day.

At first, both see Jesus (sort of) and therefore believe they know who and what he is: to Nicodemus, Jesus is a teacher sent from God, someone that only the likes of Nicodemus, himself an esteemed religious leader, can recognize; to the Samaritan woman, Jesus is a Jewish man who will look upon her—a Samaritan woman—with contempt, if he looks upon her at all. They're both in a fog, but don't realize it, and that's the worst thing: to be in a fog, but to think you're seeing everything there is to see—a condition by no means unique to the Biblical world of the first century.

But then, through surprising and surprisingly searching and personal conversations, Jesus shows each of them that he knows them far better than they know him, far better than they know themselves, in fact. He thereby helps them to see themselves and to see him more fully—he dispels the fog or at least some of it—and thus sets them on the journey to belief and life.

And of course it's funny: to see people *not* seeing what's right in front of them, and then watch them slowly, slowly, cluing in is the stuff of comedy. So when Jesus tells Nicodemus that he must be born again/born from above, Nicodemus asks, "How can I get back in my mother's womb?" When Jesus offers the Samaritan woman "living water," so that she will never thirst again, the woman says, "Give me a bucket."

Just as they don't fully see Jesus, they don't get the full meaning of his words. Just as they don't see Jesus as the one sent from above, so they don't get the spiritual—the heavenly—meaning of his words.

It happens again and again in John's Gospel: when Jesus gives the man born blind his sight, when he feeds the five thousand, when he walks on water, when he turns water into wine, when he tells the invalid who has been lying on his mat for 38 years to get up and walk, when he heals the Roman official's son, when he raises Lazarus from the dead—all these deeds in John's Gospel are called "signs," they point to who Jesus is—and they are meant to get those around him—and us as readers!— to look again so we might begin to see Jesus more fully, to believe more deeply, and thus to have life.

But too often Jesus' contemporaries do not see the signs as signs, but instead take them as ultimate realities. It would be like my driving down Main Street, and being so entranced by the beautiful redness of the red lights, that I forget to stop. Or being so taken with the shape of the letters—the particular typeface used—that I stop reading. Or closer to home, it's like being so taken with—or annoyed by—the tone and timbre of the preacher's voice that we stop listening to the meaning of his words.

And it's not just Jesus' deeds, it's also his words. His words are signs pointing to—directing us to see more fully—who and what Jesus is. In John's Gospel, the words of Jesus that most dramati-

cally point to who and what he is are the so-called “I am” statements: statements that Jesus makes about himself—“I am the good shepherd,” “I am the vine,” “I am the light of the world,” “I am the way, the truth and the life”—that point to who and what Jesus is, that are meant to get those around him—and us as readers!— to look again so we begin to see Jesus more fully, and thus begin to believe more deeply, and thus live more fully; statements that are both dramatic and puzzling, and have spiritual meaning that’s easy to miss. Throughout Lent, I’ll be preaching on John’s Gospel, focusing on the “I am” statements, so for today: *I am the bread of life*.

Then Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.”

And just like the Samaritan woman asking for a bucket, what do his listeners say to him?, “Sir, give us this bread always.”

And then when Jesus makes it explicit, when he says directly: “I *am* the bread of life.” What do some of his listeners say?, “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’?” In other words, they insist that their initial, partial view of Jesus is the complete and final one: he’s nothing more than Mary and Joseph’s son.

And when Jesus says it again, “I am the bread of life,” like Nicodemus wondering how he can get back into his mother’s womb, they ask, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?”

They miss the spiritual meaning. It’s funny; they’re in a fog, and it’s funny—but let’s not forget so are we. So how do we begin to see Jesus more fully, so that we might believe more fully, and thus live fully?

Taste and see that the Lord is good. Right here in the bread and the wine (and yes, the juice too), God is ready to enter and cross into the human sphere, though unrecognized.

This is the true bread that comes down from heaven to give life to the world. I know, I know, it looks like ordinary bread that comes from Kroger—that’s the unrecognized part. But this bread and wine (and this juice) is a sign that not only points to Jesus, but also brings Jesus’ life to us, and our lives to Jesus. It unites us, through the Holy Spirit, to him, to God his father, to one another, to the church, and to the world. Here, the fog begins to clear; here, we begin to see that the world is charged with the grandeur of God, that there lives the dearest freshness, deep down things; here we see God; here, we find strength for our journey to see Jesus more fully, to believe more deeply, and thus to have life, his life; here, is life. As we prepare for communion, may He be known to us in breaking bread. Amen.

