

Proper 12B; July 28, 2024
Grace Episcopal Church, Keswick, Virginia
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“When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.”
~an excerpt from John 6:1-21

This story of the feeding of the multitude appears in all four gospels. The accounts match fairly closely, creating an image of Communion for the reader, as Jesus breaks the bread and distributes it. But it's only in the gospel of John that we find this reference to the people wanting to make Jesus king. It's a marked contrast to the gospel reading we heard three weeks ago (Mark 6:1-13), where Jesus is ignored and scorned in his hometown. In both instances, Jesus leaves the scene. The people in both settings profoundly misunderstand him, and so he withdraws from them. He removes himself from those who want to define him, either as a fraud or as a king. He **could** stay. He could stay to help them understand his ministry and mission. But instead, in both instances, he leaves. It's a bit like the advice we hear him give his disciples when he tells them to “shake the dust from their feet” and move on, if people won't receive them. It's always up to the people—to receive the Word—or not. But if they choose not to receive it, then there are others who may. So, move on, if Love can't gain a toehold. It's good advice. It prevents frustration. And, it also honors those not wanting to hear what Jesus has to say, as well as those who misperceive his message. The take-home from this isn't to feel superior to those from whom Jesus moves on. Rather, it's incumbent on us, as believers, to ask ourselves where in our own lives we misperceive the message of radical love Jesus offers.

It's harder than it might seem to internalize the teachings of Christ. We've heard them repeated week in, week out—love God and love your neighbor as yourself. We rehearse them in our baptismal vows and reaffirm our commitment to Love every time we receive Communion. Even so, it's sometimes so hard not to want to leave town when loving your neighbor is a challenge. So what do we do when we fail to show the love that is in us? Well, scripture tells us to repent—to get right with Jesus, so we can get right with the world. The problem is sometimes we don't really want to get right with the world. **Jesus** didn't get right with his hometown or the folks who wanted to make him king. Maybe we don't have to get right with folks who misunderstand us, either. Sure would make loving others easier if we only had to work at loving those who understand us as we understand ourselves. The difference is Jesus doesn't quit loving folks who misunderstand him. In fact, he gives his life for those who don't yet understand. He moves on when folks try to put him in a box that doesn't fit. But he doesn't stop loving them. It is, for me, the hardest part of what it means to follow Christ. It's so easy to harden my heart and sometimes so difficult a road to love those who don't love me. Jesus asks us to stay on the road. Today's gospel asks us to stay on the road with Jesus, instead of worshipping him. It asks us not to make him king, if we want to know him in our hearts.

My grandmother taught me something about this perspective when I was a child. My father's mother was not a religious woman. She took her children to Sunday School and church, but she spent the church service in the parish hall, drinking tea with a handful of other renegades who shared my grandmother's disdain for

organized religion. After her children were all grown and had moved on to lives of their own, she continued to go to church; but, she never actually attended the service, still preferring the tea and coffee drinking crowd in the parish hall over, as she put it, the “hypocrites in the sanctuary”. This form of church-going seemed not to bother anyone except for my mother. But since grandmother lived in Pennsylvania, we only got to witness her church-going behavior when she came to visit us—which she did once a year. She rode the train down on the free pass she was afforded because of my grandfather’s employment with the Pennsylvania Railroad. She was easy to spot in the train station. She was the one being trailed by a red cap, pushing her train trunk and four hat boxes—one hat for each Sunday of her month-long stay. Grandmother always looked forward to going to church with us because she loved the men who skipped church to have coffee together in the parish hall. She said they were far more entertaining than the coffee and tea group back home.

One Sunday mother had had enough. She announced at breakfast that grandmother would be sitting in the pew with us that day because, as mother put it, folks were “being scandalized” by her flirting with “the derelicts” instead of coming to church with her family. The slightest smile passed across my father’s face, as he waited for his mother and his wife to get things straight. My mother’s face was flushed with the righteousness of her conviction. Grandmother waited for a moment and then said in an even voice, “Sometimes it’s hard to love each other, isn’t it Mildred?” Mother’s eyes still flashed with fight. But grandmother continued saying, “Those men you call derelicts don’t go to the service because

they don't like being told they're sinners every week, even though they all know they have plenty of room for improvement in their lives. They put on their suits and ties and come to church to have coffee together every Sunday. They listen to each other, support one another and care about each other's lives. They want to love their neighbors, even if they don't like them. They want to follow Jesus, but they don't want to worship him. You can't tell me anything more important is taking place in that sanctuary." There was silence at the table. A single tear trickled down mother's face as she said, "You're right. I can't." "Then why do you go?" grandmother asked. Mother thought for a moment and then said, "I go for many of the same reasons. But, I like the ritual. It comforts me." Grandmother smiled saying, "I'll let the derelicts know."

The following Sunday, mother took a plate of doughnuts to the coffee group before she headed into church. The Sunday after that, the coffee group made a rare guest appearance at the service. No one spoke about it; no one needed to. Likely most of us here this morning can think of a place where our hearts might be temporarily hardened. Equally, we probably know what we need to do to make amends. Amazing things happen when we're willing to get real with ourselves. We can feed the multitudes and have food left over. But that can't happen when we make Jesus a king, set apart for worship, set apart to fix the ills of the world by divine decree. It happens by following the path of love that calls us to be the Word incarnate. It happens when we realize we do make a difference in one another's lives, for better or for worse. May we seek the path of Love as often as we're able, that Love might reign in our hearts and in our world.

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