

## What will it take for Jesus to get through to you?

9<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost. Proper 13, Year B. August 2, 2009. (Text: John 6:24-35)

“What are you looking for?” Those are the first words spoken by Jesus in the Gospel according to John. In your red-letter Bible (you *do* have one, don’t you?), these are the first red words in John. Theologians think that question is a key to understanding everything else Jesus says or does in that gospel.

*What are YOU looking for?* I believe most people come to church because they’re looking for something. Maybe some just have “the church habit,” so they arrive here automatically on Sunday mornings. But I think most of us – at some level – are *looking for something* when we come to church. A few might just be trying to find a congenial group of people to be friends with. But I suspect the majority of us are here because we’re *looking* for something else, we *want* something else. Maybe we’re not entirely sure what that “something else” is. If we don’t find it the first time we come, we might come back a few more times ...or we might not.

So: *What are YOU looking for today?*

- Maybe you’re looking for inspiration: you want a word from the Bible or a word from the preacher or a prayer or *something* that will help you get out of bed on Monday and go about your business with a spring in your step and peace in your heart.
- Maybe you’re looking for guidance: how do I cope with what my wife and I heard from the doctor this week? She has Alzheimer’s. ...What can I do to help my son get his messed-up life straightened out without Completely alienating him?
- Maybe you’re looking for meaning in your life: I’m bored and depressed; what am I here for? ...Is there something I’m supposed to *do* other than make money and play golf? ...I need a reason to keep going.
- Maybe you’re looking for healing or help: I have cancer, and I’m scared. ...Do miracles still happen? I’m on my last month of severance pay, but haven’t found a new job yet. ...What do I do now?

I read this week about a young woman in southern California who had everything she once thought she wanted in life. At age 25 she was earning a good six-figure salary. She owned a string of properties – including her own fine home with a silver Mercedes sport coupe parked out front. She had both youth and wealth. Most people would say that she had everything in life going her way. To be doing so well in this economy at age 25 is amazing. But she drove that Mercedes to a Laguna Beach hotel, checked in, and then checked out of life with an overdose of pills, leaving behind a note that said she was committing suicide because, and this is what she wrote, “I am so tired of clapping with one hand.” I’m not sure what caused her to make a reference to the famous Zen *koan*, but this successful young woman was obviously looking for something she couldn’t find. So she gave up and decided to die.

If you’re looking for something – and you haven’t found it yet, but you’re here in a church on Sunday morning – *what will it take for Jesus to get through to you?* Hang on to this question, and I’ll come back to it in just a few minutes.

Last week, we read John’s story about Jesus feeding five thousand people with a little boy’s picnic lunch of five barley rolls and two pieces of dried fish. The child shared what he had; Jesus gave thanks for it; and then Jesus personally handed out the bread and fish to the whole crowd. You remember. The people who were there had as much to eat as they wanted, and then Jesus’ disciples gathered up a dozen big baskets of leftovers. The hungry crowd figured that anybody

who could do that ought to be running the country, so they decided to take Jesus down to Jerusalem and put him on a throne. He didn't like their idea, so he ran off and hid from them.

Today we read about what happened after that. Jesus crossed back over to Capernaum, his home town. Some of the people out of the crowd he fed on the other side of the lake arrived there, looking for him. (Now, don't forget! Jesus' very first words in John's gospel are the question, "*What are you looking for?*") When they find him, he says, "*You're looking for me, not because you saw a sign from God, but because I filled your empty stomachs —and for free! Don't waste your energy striving for food like that. Work for the kind of bread that lasts, food that will nourish eternal life in you, bread the Son of Man wants to give you.*"

We like people who give us free food. That's why one of the first rules I learned as a youth minister back in 1974 was: "Always provide pizza." Teenagers are perpetually hungry, and they'll come to youth group for food, if for nothing else. Kids want pizza. That's easy. ("Hello. Is this Dominoes? Great. I want a dozen large pepperoni with extra cheese. And fast!") —What do *adults* want? ...Whatever it is, we tend to like people who give us what we want. Especially for free.

The crowd originally followed Jesus over to the other side of the lake because they'd heard he was a healer, and many of them were sick. They were deaf, or blind, or lame, or disfigured, and they wanted him to make them well. Those who weren't sick were curious to see what would happen, so they could go "Oooh!" and "Aaah!" and "Look at that!" —By late afternoon they were hungry, and so he fed them. The next day they rowed across to his home town, looking for him. To be fair, they were mostly people who lived a subsistence lifestyle, literally living from one meal to the next. (Like people in Haiti.) Who could blame hungry people for looking for more free food? And who could blame sick people for traveling across country to seek out a man with a well-earned reputation for healing the sick? They had real life needs! And Jesus – in their minds – was obviously the man who could (and did) meet those real-life needs.

But, of course, their diseases that needed healing and their hunger that needed satisfying kept them from being able to think much about their *other* needs, *deeper* needs —*soul* needs— that Jesus had come into the world to meet. That's why he said, "*You people are looking for another free lunch. But God sent me here to give you a totally different kind of 'bread'!*"

Poor people. Poor hungry people. They didn't get it. They were not in the mood for metaphors. They could not see what they were not looking for, even though it was hiding in plain sight. They started asking him to give them "a sign," talking about Moses and manna from heaven. —Hello? ...What were they thinking? What just happened? Jesus had just fed five thousand people with five dinner rolls and two pieces of fish, and now they want "a sign"?! They couldn't grasp what was really going on. They couldn't see what they weren't expecting. Jesus was not getting through to them. —Oh, my. Oh, my.

They didn't get it. But do *WE*? This brings me back to the question I asked a couple of minutes ago: *What will it take for Jesus to get through to you?* What will it take?

Do you think Jesus could get through to you if you witnessed a really-truly, honest-to-God miracle? If so, I have to tell you something from my own experience as a pastor who has seen really-truly, honest-to-God miracles: *Miracles won't satisfy your hunger for God.* Sometime miracles get through to people, and sometimes they don't. A miracle will only "get through to us" if we're able to see *beyond* the miracle itself. A miracle – whether we're talking about a healing for a sick

person, or a job for a jobless person, or a meal for a starving person – is *a road sign that God puts up, pointing further*. It's a flashing red neon arrow that says, "Look! Here's a gift. Now go this way to meet the Giver!"

Jesus did not come into the world in order to do miracles. His miracles – like miracles today – were just road signs, arrows pointing the way to go. Road signs are necessary, but they only work if we're able to follow directions. Jesus came into the world to draw us to God: the fulfillment of all our hungers, all our hopes. The people who wanted a "sign" asked Jesus what they needed to DO in order to be doing the "works of God." He gave them a very simple answer: "*Believe in the one whom God has sent.*" Come to me. Put your trust in me. I am the Bread of Life, and I am putting myself in your hands.

I have to confess, I'm a perceptually challenged person. I don't see what I don't *expect* to see, even when it's right in front of my eyes. I can't see what I'm not looking for. This happens over and over again. For example, Joan asks me to set the dinner table, and when she makes the request she puts a stack of plates out on the counter below the cabinet where they're kept. I say, "Okay, honey," and go into the kitchen, and the very first thing I do is take *another* stack of plates out of the cabinet. I'm standing directly in front of the plates she has already put out for me. They're hiding in plain sight. I have eyes, but I don't see. Why? *Because I can't see what I don't EXPECT to see*. This has been going on for all 17 years of our married life, but every time she asks me to set the table I still expect to find the plates in the cabinet, not on the counter.

So, I ask you again: *What will it take for God to get through to you?*