

## Tenth Sunday after Pentecost July 28 2024

### John 6:1-21

Karen and I were on the way to North Carolina and we saw the following sign for Cracker Barrel. Now, going 70 miles an hour and just glancing at the sign I read it as two separate statements. If you are over 20, your meal is under \$12. I was a bit confuzzled, but being someone who is approaching that time when my age will affect what I pay at a restaurant I thought, maybe this is a way to lower the demographics at Cracker Barrel.

Did I misread this sign? What does it say? Right, it was an economic appeal not an age-related appeal. The sign says they have over 20 meals on their menu that are under \$12.

Sometimes, we mis-read the signs. In this case, I just lost a bit of face with my wife. But what about the crowd following Jesus in the gospel of John?

The crowd follows Jesus because they saw what he was doing for the enfeebled, the sick, as signs indicating something more. In the feeding of the 5,000 the crowd sees another sign. A billboard indicating to them that Jesus was Messiah- that great warrior, prince, priest that would claim all three roles and rule over them and the world. Convinced they had read the signs correctly; in verse 15 they are about to take Jesus by force- to literally catch him or seize him up- and make him king. To take over King Herod's place but also to challenge Rome, and the corrupt religious authorities in Jerusalem. To lead them as an army to take power over their land! To restore the glory of the Jewish state to what it had been under King David! They were ready to follow, fight and die for Jesus the

king. But they misread the signs. At least as badly as I did whizzing by the Cracker Barrel billboard.

When Jesus sees the crowd coming, knowing what they are trying to do, he does what anyone does when confronted with a wild animal... he backs away slowly, up the mountain. Leaving them grasping at air.

Why does Jesus leave? Why doesn't he accept the crowd proclaiming him king? Wouldn't he be able to do so much more if he had political power? If he could bring salvation to others, make them believe, make them behave, make it law? Force them to follow the Gospel!

What about Jesus and political/earthly power? In Luke 4, the tempter offers to give Jesus rule over the kingdoms of the world. The whole world! He just needs to bow down to him. Just think of all the good you can do. All the people you will save.... And Jesus refuses. Why? Is it just the bowing down to Satan, or something more?

God's reign does not operate like the kingdoms of this world. Jesus says as much to Pilate in John 18:36, "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest...but my kingdom is not from here."

Read the gospels. Not once does Jesus make a move to take political power. Even as he does political acts. Because what he does affects the polis- the Greek word for city/community from which we get our word politics. When Jesus heals, when he corrects the religious and secular authorities, some of whom believe they serve God and God's reign, Jesus' actions affect the polis. The community. And in this way, he is political. But he does not seek or want political power.

Like me and the Cracker Barrel billboard, the crowd see in Jesus what they want to see. Their political, religious, and military savior. But their imagination is too small.

It is arguably true that the most influential time of the Christian church, is before we gained political power in 313 CE. When the Roman Emperor Constantine ended persecution of the Christians and moved them into the very center of empire. When it became cool to be Christian. When it began to be a box to be ticked so you could get ahead.

It was before that time that Christians became known for caring for widow's and orphans. They fed, clothed, housed the poor and destitute. They loved people. Poor people and rich people. Women and children, who were only property in that society, were welcomed into the church. Women played a large role in the early church. All this is part of what drew people. Acts 2 reminds us the followers of Jesus enjoyed the goodwill of all people. This is what the signs Jesus performed were pointing to. Not that he was the Messiah of the Jewish imagination, but that this is what the reign of God looks like. And it can happen without political power. The crowds imagination (or lack thereof) led them to misinterpret who Jesus was.

What image do you tend to make the Christ into, the Messiah into? We know we're getting into trouble when it looks an awful lot like a political figure. When we hear Jesus' call to overcome the world as a political call to domination and not a religious call to love. When it calls on us to kill our neighbor, even the one who is our enemy, rather than to love them. When it speaks of domination and

control, rather than finding strength in weakness and power in the cross. In sacrifice for others.

Jesus warns us in the gospels that we need to be careful, listen, pay attention, because many will come and say “I am the savior” or say “That person is the savior”. Check it out, Jesus says. Do they say, look, and act like I do? Do they help people imagine a world that isn’t built on power and domination? Do they proclaim love, mercy, grace? Because that is what the reign of God looks like. If it doesn’t look like that... walk away, back up the mountain.

Paul talks about followers of Jesus being citizens first and foremost of the reign of heaven. Then we are citizens of whatever kingdom we find ourselves in. Martin Luther talked about this as the two kingdoms- the Right Hand reign of heaven and the Left Hand reign of the world. Both of which God has power over, but only one of which (The Right Hand in which the church – the Body of Christ operates) saves us.

As followers of Jesus we can see how God has provided government to keep its citizens safe, to provide for their health and safety, for the economy. That God has established the rule of law as a pale shadow of what grace in the reign of heaven does. Luther talks about how we as believers can and should act in the Left-Hand reign of the world. Can serve in offices there. But he is also very careful to remind us that the Left Hand reign of the World cannot save people. You cannot legislate belief. You cannot legislate the Gospel- in fact that is an oxymoron.

The Gospel is a gift given to the Right Hand Reign of God and only here can people find the life that truly is life. Only here can we find the Reign of God because that

reign is based on grace, mercy, love, sacrifice, what the world would call weakness. To point to anything else and say that is God's reign, that is God's will is, literally, unbelievable.

This is why Jesus backs away from those who would seize him and make him their political king, not their savior. Because they are just seeking to remake Jesus into their own image. For their own purposes. Not his. Not God's. Because they seek not to establish the Reign of God, but the Reign of the World. Because the reign of God never comes through force.

We have been talking about the reign of God for the last ten weeks. Seeking to discern what it looks like. And the Gospel of John puts another brush stroke on the image.

In John, and especially in this passage, it is about abundance- the reign of God can draw forth abundance from just a little bit shared in the face of an enormous need. Today that little bit is specifically the food of the poor- barley bread and a few small fish, probably some kind of a protein paste. Jesus makes of that little bit offered up by a young child enough. Enough to satisfy everyone who is hungry. Just as Jesus took a whole lot of water at the Wedding in Cana and turned it into an abundance of wine. This is what the reign of God looks like.

Taking what seems like just a little and making of it enough and more than enough. There are always leftovers. There is always more room at the table. There is always another slice of pie so that all might be fed.

Friends, we are in the midst of a political season here in our country. We can and should be active in that discernment together about the way in which we should

go. We can and should bring our faith into the voting booth. It is a vital part of who we are. But we should also be careful in ourselves and in those who we listen to in the political sphere whenever we close in on legislating the Gospel. In trying to establish the reign of God through political means. When you hear that, feel that, just remember Jesus backing away from the crowd and back up the mountain.

I think one of the reasons this kind of appeal works is that people are hungry. Hungry for the life that truly is life. And we have food to offer them. The food of the Gospel. To proclaim in how we speak and live what the reign of God looks like. And it looks a lot like what we do today.

Gather a group of imperfect, broken, gifted, beloved people together. To sit at the feet of Jesus and imagine that the beauty of what he describes is what can be. To confess our shortcomings, to be forgiven for where we have wronged God, others, and ourselves. To come to this table and be fed with Christ's own Body and Blood. To receive a little bit and know that it is not only enough but more than enough to strengthen us to follow Jesus into this world and join him in proclaiming that the reign of God has come near. That we can experience that reign- not through political power- but through the power of God's love in Jesus Christ. Through his grace and mercy- which is the only way for us to experience that life that truly is life.

We need not look for signs my friends, because they can be misunderstood. All we need to do is look to Jesus. And follow him.