

“Making Sense of Things”
A Sermon by Rev. Victoria ByRode
The Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time
August 2, 2009
Scripture: John 6:24-35

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION: *Lord, before we speak, before we think – we pray. We pray because the knowledge we seek, the thoughts we need, are not self-derived. We need your wisdom and your insight to help us make sense of this world. Amen.*

Before I begin this sermon, I need to remind those of you who have been coming to church for a long time and explain to those of you who have not, that it is pretty common practice for us here at First Church to follow what is known as the “Common Lectionary”. The lectionary is a tool for us preacher types which sort of hold our feet to the fire. It is a means of making sure that we don’t just preach our own particular “hobby horse”, but rather that we look at and preach on a different text each week. It is a way to insure you that you will hear the whole Bible within a three year period. This year – from the beginning of Advent in 2008 until the beginning of Advent 2009, we are focused on Year B in our three year lectionary.

I tell you all this to preface my statement that many preachers, myself included, facing the summer lectionary in Year B, struggle with how to present a fresh way to look at what is pretty much the same story each week.

Our Gospel reading this morning follows immediately the story we heard last week about the feeding of the 5000. I’m sure you remember how it went. Jesus asked Philip how they could possibly feed such a large crowd. Then when Jesus was presented with five small loaves of bread and two fish, he gave thanks for the food, and five thousand people ate their fill and there were even left-overs. .

This morning’s reading begins, “Once the crowd realized that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they got into the boats and went to

Capernaum in search of Jesus.”

This crowd of people knew that someone quite unique had been in their presence. Here was a man with wondrous powers. A magician might pull a rabbit out of a hat, but no magician can take five small barley loaves and two small fish and feed 5,000 plus people! Any reasonable person would say it was impossible, but it was possible. There were witnesses galore who attested that it really happened. It is the most widely reported miracle in the Bible. People couldn’t believe their eyes, or their stomach. “What kind of man is this?” they asked. “How are we to make sense of this?” And you know what? We are still asking those questions more than two thousand years later. What kind of man is this? And how are we to make sense of things?

When St. Augustine was asked a question about astrology, he answered that his main quarrel with the practice of astrology is not that it’s superstitious. Astrology is a lie because it claims to have simple answers for complicated questions. That great theologian had such respect for the complexity of life that he had contempt for easy solutions.

All of us try every single day of our lives to make sense of things. We love simple answers: the tree causes of World War II: the four reasons Krispy Kreme donuts should be considered health food; the five ways the Yankees aren’t as good as they used to be. We are forever pinning things down, explaining things, fixing things in our mind. But, my friends, faith doesn’t work that way and we shouldn’t make it appear simpler than it is. Our job is not to explain God, Jesus or Christianity in ten words or less. Rather, our calling is to be part of a continuing conversation with God. The stories of Jesus can’t be summarized in succinct, clear statements.

Whatever happened that day after Jesus fed those 5000 people, the crowd was amazed. They followed him around the Sea of Galilee, but not because they are anxious to hear what he has to say. They want another free meal: “Do what you did before. This time could you grill the fish and serve it with a dill sauce, please and thank

you? And sour dough bread would be nice, too.”

Jesus tells them not to work for food that spoils, but to pay attention to food that lasts forever. The connection between the bread they have eaten and eternity is unclear, to say the least, so they ask him to explain. Jesus says, “I am the bread of life. Whoever eats this bread will never die.” For two thousand years, Jesus’ followers have tried to make sense of the things Jesus said – to make what he said seem more reasonable than it often sounds: “Eat my flesh and you will never die” is a strange thing to say. Who wouldn’t be confused?

What would be our reaction? A street preacher shouts: “Step right up. Get your bread from heaven. Anyone who eats this will never die.” This is beyond Jimmy Swaggart Sweating, Benny Hinn crying, and Oral Roberts’ 900 foot Jesus. Jesus sounds like a snake oil salesman. The theological sophisticates of the Hebrew Divinity School of Jerusalem complain, “What kind of nonsense is this? What would your parent think if they heard this foolishness?” Jesus doesn’t respond, but says something about being drawn to God, and again brings up the bread from heaven that leads to life. The conversation is hard to follow. Jesus uses phrases which need to be explained without ever explaining them.

Faith is still mistakenly defined as a set of beliefs. Jesus teaches that faith is an ongoing search for meaning: our response to the way in which God pulls us towards God’s self. Faith is not an accomplishment, but a gift. Belief is not an achievement but grace. We are here today, my friends, not because we are intelligent, but because, in part, God has drawn us here? God subtly pulls us along, offering flashes of illumination along the dark path, placing within us the feeling that we are not alone and, yet, not yet home.

We think we know where we’re going, but are we really sure? How lost are we? To where are we being drawn?

Faith is no certain, firm, unwavering knowledge. Faith is being in conversation with God, being drawn to a God we don’t fully

understand. Faith is more like a novel than a textbook. You can read a math book, think about it, and work at it until you get it. “The square root of 225 is 15.” But – when you read a great novel you come out with your life changed, and your way of viewing the world transformed. At the end of a great novel, you don’t say, “I got it,” because instead of you getting it – it has gotten you!

Christian writer Philip Yancey once presented several slides to a group of students in the United States showing the way that Jesus is portrayed in a variety of other cultures. He then asked the students what they thought Jesus looked like. Nearly the entire group suggested that Jesus was tall (which is very unlikely for a first-century Jew). Most said he was handsome, and no one said overweight. Yancey then showed them a BBC film featuring “a pudgy actor” playing Christ. Some students found the film offensive. Yancey concluded that our glamorized representations of Jesus say more about us than about him.”

To be a Christian means to be someone who is related, in a vital, life-changing way, to the person of Jesus Christ. Christianity is not so much a philosophy of life as it is a relationship with a life-giving person. This is a different way of thinking about faith, a different way of making sense of ourselves and the world, a way of making sense of the gift of relationship to the Risen Christ.

Most of us think about things on the basis of our past experiences and our previous concepts. We see something strange, something new, something out of the ordinary, and what do we do? We immediately attempt to put this strange thing in the context of what is not strange, the unknown explained by what is known. This is who we make sense of the world. We “make sense of things” by making them fit within the pattern of what is already known.

But maybe – understanding, making things fit into neat little boxes – making sense of things is not the point. Maybe the point is to allow Jesus “the One who has come down from

heaven” to keep working with us, to keep surprising us.

God offers the bread of life because we don’t completely understand: “This is the bread that has come down from heaven that we can all be taught by God.” The bread of life is an ongoing dialogue with God which becomes the best part of who we are. Eating this bread is accepting this conversation into our hearts. The bread of life is the willingness to listen to God, to be in dialogue with this often difficult story of Christ. Our understanding or ability to explain is not the point. The point is to be in the conversation, to listen carefully, and to be drawn to faith and this table by the grace of God. May be it be so for you and for me. Amen.

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