Seeing, Seeking, Following*

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1997 August 02

1 Do We See God?

Five hundred five years ago today, in 1492, Christopher Columbus sailed west from Spain to reach the East. For centuries, the spice trade had gone overland from India. In hopes of finding a new route to India, some explorers were sailing south along the coast of Africa. But Christopher Columbus did not travel overland or sail around Africa; he sailed **west** to reach the East, and thus discovered a whole new world. Given the same situation as the other explorers, he saw a different approach. Similarly, where others see ordinary events, God calls Christians to see God's work.

Just thirty-two years ago, in 1955, a tired, forty-two year old Negro seamstress living in Montgomery, Alabama, refused to give her bus seat to a white man. The bus driver ordered her to yield her seat, but she refused. He had Rosa Parks arrested. Some might view this as just the story of an inconsiderate woman riding a city bus and an overzealous bus driver, but Martin Luther King, Jr., saw beyond the everyday story of Rosa Parks's bus ride to see an opportunity to oppose the oppressive segregation in the South, an oppression that degraded the human dignity of both blacks and whites.

At a rally to boycott the Montgomery buses, he spoke of the incident's greater significance. He said,

> We are here ... for serious business. We are here in a general sense because ... we are determined to apply our citizenship to

> the fullness of its means. We are here because of our love for democracy, because of our deep-seated belief that democracy ... is the greatest form of government on earth. But we are here in a specific sense, because of the bus situation in Montgomery....
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> ... Just the other day, ... one of the finest citizens in Montgomery ... was taken from a bus and carried to jail and arrested because she refused ... to give her seat to a white person....[**?**]

Martin Luther King, Jr., saw through an ordinary incident to serve God's call to respect human dignity.

Today's gospel reading describes a situation two thousand years ago where the people failed to see the significance of Jesus's miracle. As Mark Torrance described last week, Jesus had multiplied one boy's five loaves and two fish to feed five thousand people. That night, Jesus left the crowd, but the people found some boats and travelled to Capernaum to find him. They ask, "Rabbi, when did you come here?" (John 6:25b, NRSV). Understanding their motivation for finding him, Jesus replies, "You are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves" (John 6:26b, NRSV). Still unsure of Jesus's role as a prophet, they ask him for a sign. "What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing? Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat'" (John 6:30b-31, NRSV). The crowd focusses on the food and misses the miracle.

Jesus calls for them to open their eyes to see God's work. He says, "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" (John 6:32b, NRSV). Jesus calls for them not only to see God but also to seek God. "Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life" (John 6:27a, NRSV). William Barclay writes,

> It was Jesus' whole point that all that these Jews were interested in was physical satisfaction. They had received an unexpectedly free and lavish meal; and they wanted more. But there are other hungers—and these other hungers can only be satisfied by Jesus Christ. There is the hunger for truth—and He alone can give men truth. There is the hunger for life—and He alone can give men life and give it to them more abundantly. There is the hunger for love—and He alone can give men the love that outlasts sin and

> death. It is Christ alone who can satisfy the immortal longings and the insatiable hunger of the human heart and soul. [**?**, page 216]

2 How Do We Seek God?

Both we and the crowd of two thousand years ago hunger for life and truth, and Jesus satisfies these. So the crowd asks the next logical question which is also the second point of the sermon, "How do we seek God?" (John 6:28b). Jesus replies, "Not works, but only faith in me is required" (John 6:29b). But, what is faith? Again, William Barclay writes,

> Faith means being in such a relationship with God that we are friends with God, that we are not terrified of God any more, that God is not our enemy and our prosecutor but our Father and our friend, that we give God the trust and obedience and the submission which naturally arise from this new relationship.... The whole essence of Christianity is that we would never have known that God is like this had not Jesus come and lived and died to tell us so. It is only because Jesus came to tell us that God is our Father, that God loves us, that God cares, and that God wants nothing more than to forgive....[**?**, pages 218–219]

Jesus came to explain God.

There's the story of the farmer living through a cold, snowy Midwestern winter, looking out the window and seeing a flock of birds on his farm. They huddled together, shivering from the snowy cold. With his heart touched, he knows his heated barn has plenty of room for these birds. So he puts on his coat, opens the barn doors, and waits for the birds to enter the barn. He waits and waits, but they do not see the open barn doors. They continue to shiver outside. Next, he grabs some bird seed and makes a trail to the barn, but the birds fail to see the small seeds, lost among the snow. Next, he comes behind the birds and tries to shoo them into the barn, but they fly in the opposite direction to regather into their shivering mass. The farmer thinks to himself, "If only I could be a bird, I could show them the warm barn."

Just as those shivering birds want warmth, we want life and truth. The farmer may have failed to communicate with the birds, but God sent Jesus.

And we seek Jesus, who calls himself “the bread of life” (John 6:35, NRSV). Why does he use the word “bread?” Bread is essential to living; it is the minimum for human subsistence (Is 3:1). In the agricultural society of Jesus’s time, bread formed a major portion of the diet. When feeding the five thousand, the crowd ate only two things: fish and **bread**. During this time, people spent a significant portion of their days preparing and baking bread. Not to have bread meant the most extreme poverty or distress [**?**, “Bread,” pages 461b–464a]. Thus, Jesus’s use of the word “bread” reminds us he is essential to life.

really women

3 How Do We Know We Are Following God?

Now that, we see we hunger for God and we know that faith in Jesus as the son of God is required, we reach the third point of the sermon: How do we know when we are following God?. This is a very difficult question to answer, but Paul gave us some hints in today’s epistle reading from the fourth chapter of his letter to the Ephesians. Paul writes,

> I therefore ... beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love [and] in ... peace. Ephesians 4:1–3 (NRSV)

For example, Abraham Lincoln’s second inaugural address indicates both sides prayed to the same God.

Martin Luther King, Jr., said it differently when he called for a time when “all men will respect the dignity and worth of human personality”[**?**, page 22]. He led the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s which sought to win respect for the human dignity of Negro people. Closer to home, this church respects the human dignity of senior citizens by sponsoring the Senior Nutrition Program. Every weekday, over two hundred meals are served to senior citizens. Some participants are wealthy and some are desperately poor, but all, regardless of how much they can contribute, receive a warm, nutritious meal.

Jesus answers the question of knowing whether we are following God by commanding, “Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another” (John 13:34b, NRSV). In other words, **to follow God is to love**.

But, our love should not be stagnant; it must grow. In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul continues, “Speaking ... in love, we must grow up in every way ... into Christ” (Eph 4:15, NRSV). Augustine, in his *Confessions*

(I. 30) “describes how most of us never grow up, but to the end of life keep strenuously playing the old nursery games, with slightly different toys and counters, . . . gold and money [replacing] the earlier marbles.. . . ” [**?**, exposition on John 6:24–27]. Today, we see the same mentality on car bumper stickers: “He who dies with the most toys wins.” As any parent knows, even the most popular toy eventually becomes uninteresting. Remember that first bicycle which you rode so much that Mom almost had to open a drive-through window to make sure you ate dinner? Is it collecting dust in the corner of your garage? Remember the Atari 2600 computer game system that used to be so exciting? Where is it now? We may outgrow these toys, but we never outgrow Jesus. Jesus calls us to continually improve our relationship with him. I illustrate this in my closing example.

Hiking in Yosemite

I go hiking in Yosemite National Park several times each year. When I go on a hike, first I decide where I want to go. What do I want to see? Do I want to climb to the top of a waterfall? Do I want to walk up out of Yosemite Valley? Do I want to climb to the top of a mountain? The destination is almost always something new, something I’ve not previously seen. I just have to have faith that it really exists and that I can travel there.

After filling my water bottles, gathering my food, and lacing my hiking boots, I determine my route on the map. My map shows where other people have already travelled. They’ve constructed trails and bridges. They’ve published topographical maps showing the elevation and where water is located. To reach my destination, I rely on their work.

Then, I begin my walk. The trails are long and the sun is hot. Soon my sweaty shirt sticks to my body and I grow tired, but I keep walking. I tell myself, “Just keep putting one foot in front of the other. That’s all you need to do.” Each step by itself is almost inconsequential. The trees look almost the same, the mountain top seems just as far away, but I keep walking. All these insignificant steps, combined together, move me to my destination.

A relationship with Jesus is like this hike. First, we decide to have a relationship with him. We also know our ultimate goal: complete love for him. Since we know we have a long journey ahead of us, we purchase a Bible and start asking other Christians how to seek God. The journey is long and requires many steps so we aim just to keep moving one foot in front of the other. Each prayer, each smile given to someone else, each handshake, each visit to a friend moves us one step closer to complete love for Jesus. Along this journey, we rely on the others who have gone before us. These include those sitting in this sanctuary today and those described in the Bible. One step at a time, we continue to seek God by following Jesus. He is our living map. Jesus is the bread of life.