

# FOR ALL THE RIGHT REASONS

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**II Samuel 11:26-12:13a; Eph. 4:1-16; John 6:24-35**

Ninth Sunday After Pentecost – August 2, 2009

The story is told of a young person – let’s call him Billy, who was the class clown ... quite a rascal, always getting into trouble. Billy decided it was time to “grow up,” and he wanted to become a Christian to find out how. He was dutifully baptized and joined the church. He gave up bad habits and began worshipping every week. He read his Bible. He prayed daily. But one day, without warning, Billy stopped going to church. Several years later, Billy ran into his pastor in a store. All he had to say for his disappearing act was, “Well, I really gave it a try.”

Now Billy is not the first, nor likely will he be the last, person ever to begin a faith journey only to lose interest along the way. Throughout Christianity’s history, some folks have shown great interest for a while – but once the initial excitement of it all has diminished, they have put their Bible and their church life away and forgot about both.

The sad but true fact is that not everyone who comes to Christ stays around to follow Him. The gospels are filled with occasions when people came to Jesus. Some were there to hear a celebrity – but when they actually heard the message, they left, totally disinterested. Others came looking for a miracle worker ... for physical healing – not necessarily because they believed Jesus was truly the Son of God.

The day before today’s scripture lesson from the Gospel of John, Jesus had performed the miracle of the loaves and the fishes – not a feat that went unnoticed. People were impressed, to say the least, and they wanted Jesus to become their earthly king. But Jesus managed to slip off, and the disciples hopped into their boat and went across the lake. The next morning the crowd realized Jesus had escaped, so they began searching for Him. When they eventually caught up with Him, He was not happy with them at all. He confronted them with a directness that left little for interpretation: “...you are looking for me, not because you saw miraculous signs, but because you ate the loaves and had your fill.” Jesus clearly understood the situation at hand - the crowd simply wanted another free meal.

This brings me to the first observation I suggest we should consider together this morning.

## **I. Many People Come to Jesus for the Wrong Reasons.**

A former pastor once told the story of a young person who came to transfer membership from another local congregation and join the pastor's church. The pastor asked this person why there was interest in this specific church – and the person honestly responded that church membership and participation would increase the person's circle of acquaintances which could prove helpful to the bottom line of a new start-up business. On a different front, I recall as a child a local politician whose church attendance was non-existent until the two months before election – you could bank on it, and many a smile occurred when this elected official showed up for the every other year visits to God's house. I know you think the examples odd, but these individuals are not so different from the crowd chasing Jesus that day in our Scripture reading – some people have always wanted to follow Jesus for material, rather than spiritual reasons.

Then there are those who have come to Jesus during crisis – and there is certainly nothing wrong per se in that. Many a faith journey has been started when a crisis is imminent. It has been said that there are no atheists in a fox hole, and many a person incarcerated for a prior offense to society has sought the assurance of God's presence to sustain them in this time of crisis. In such times of crisis, some people have developed a meaningful faith enduring for a lifetime – but others have turned away once the crisis is over.

Sometimes “times of crisis” can become simply “times of bargaining.” As a lawyer I love to read about weird legal cases – like the one about the person accused of arson who was brought to the Royal Canadian Mounted Police to take a lie detector test. The defendant was put in a room that had been fitted with a concealed television camera and microphone – but somehow the authorities “forgot” to relay this fact to the accused. Left alone waiting for the test to start, the defendant knelt and prayed the prayer of all true “bargainers”: “Oh God, let me get away with what I just did just this once.” Alas for the accused there are times that cry out for “silent prayer” - and this was surely one of them. At the trial, the videotape was played for the jury, and the defendant was summarily convicted. We laugh at this person's incredible stupidity – but if we are honest, isn't this a prayer that is fairly common – one that can ring way too familiar? “Oh God, let me get away with what I just did just this once?”

Yes, people sometimes turn to Jesus for all the wrong reasons – and when they find out that they won't get what they want, their interest wanes. However, this brings me to the second observation this morning – which fortunately is more “upbeat.”

## **II. Some People Do Come to Jesus for All the Right Reasons.**

This observation, that some folks really do come to Jesus for all the right reasons, brings us to today's ultimate question: What are the right reasons for religious faith? If it isn't bread for our stomachs, then what? Recall the words of our Lord, as he told the crowd wanting more handouts that day: "*Do not work for the food that spoils, but for the food that endures to eternal life . . . .*"

Some people really get it – they do understand that Christian faith is all about change – a change from focus on self to care for others, from a temporal perspective to an eternal vision, from concern about one's own will to a life centered on God's will. So what we "get from" Christian faith is just that, a changed life – a reorientation of life based on the teachings of Jesus – life from a different perspective, with a different emphasis. As Christians we are called to pattern our actions and behavior after that of Christ. We are called to see everyone as equals, created by one God as part of one family. We are called to truly care for one another, to share with others that which God has provided for us, and to relate to one another in love and forgiveness, as God relates to us. Simply stated, we are called to live in relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

However, Christian faith requires something of us - it requires commitment. The old saying that Christ has no hands except our hands, no voice except our voice – that's really true. If Christ's work is to continue, our commitment to Jesus and to the work He started must be present and must be strong.

This all sounds more than a bit "daunting," doesn't it? How can we be expected make such a commitment? Well, this brings me to a final ... and most important ... thought for our consideration.

## **III. Christ Gives Us the Power to Live Out our Commitment to Him and to One Another.**

Sure, people initially come to Jesus for a host of reasons, some good and some not so good. Following Jesus is not always easy, and giving our life to Christ involves allowing Him to make some real changes in our life. But here is the Good News for all of us today: He gives us the power to make those changes.

The crowd in our Scripture lesson this morning was looking for food – the type of food made of yeast. But what Jesus offered them was not the bread they were seeking. It

was Himself. *“I am the bread of life,”* He said. *“Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”* In other words, when Christ sets us on our journey of faith, we are given all the food we need for the journey: Christ Himself. We go with the assurance that His Spirit will always be there to nourish us and to give us the power to make those changes that we need to make.

So as we come to the Communion Table as Children of God this morning, we do so with the knowledge that some people come to Christ for the wrong reasons, wanting Christ simply to do something for them. But we also know that others come to Christ for all the right reasons - understanding that coming to Christ is really an act of surrender. And we come to the table this morning assured by the Good News – that if we allow Christ to do for us not what we want but what He wants, then we find the power to change – to make a new beginning – a new beginning that will mean we will never hunger or thirst.