

Good News From Another World

^{NRS} **John 6:24** So when the crowd saw that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they themselves got into the boats and went to Capernaum looking for Jesus. ²⁵ When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, "Rabbi, when did you come here?" ²⁶ Jesus answered them, "Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. ²⁷ Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal."

²⁸ Then they said to him, "What must we do to perform the works of God?" ²⁹ Jesus answered them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent."

³⁰ So they said to him, "What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing?" ³¹ Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'"

³² Then Jesus said to them, "Very truly, 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. ³³ For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." ³⁴

They said to him, "Sir, give us this bread always." ³⁵ Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

Only connect. The writer E.M. Forster begins his novel Howard's End with these words: "Only connect..." I first saw a film adaptation of Howard's End in high school, and I remember having to get used to the slowness of it, the quietness of it. I was so used to American movies- so action oriented, so plot driven. Most of our movies out this summer barely give you a second to breathe much less reflect. But then when I slowed down a little bit and realized there wasn't anything wrong- this was how the movie was supposed to be I realized this slowness was the entire point. Because action wasn't what the movie, what the book, is about- but connection. It's about people understanding- understanding themselves and one another. And how hard, how rare this kind of connection is.

Sometimes, even when you've known someone for a long, long time- sometimes you have those moments where you just are having a hard time connecting.

Now, sometimes this is funny. Like when you're having a conversation with someone, and you think you're both understanding each other, but then you figure out you're completely missing each other. Two people talking past each other- I mean this is like a staple of comedy from Shakespeare to Abbot and Costello.

I remember one time my mom was trying to have a conversation with her mom, my Grandma Cashdollar. When my Grandma Cashdollar grew older, physically and mentally she stayed in really good shape- everything fired on all cylinders into her 90's, everything except for her hearing. So my mom was trying to tell Grandma about a book to buy me for my birthday- Isaac Asimov's Pebble in the Sky. And my mom was trying to keep this a secret, she was trying to be quiet, but Grandma couldn't hear her she upped the volume. And my mom also would this amazing tone, this amazing pitch to her voice- like she could cut glass with it, like dogs miles away knew they were talking and would look for cover. So now, pretty much shouting in this really piercing voice my mom just kept trying over and over. I remember her shouting. "Pebble, mom! Pebble! P-E-B..." And there was silence. "No, PEBBLE! Like a little stone." Finally, I came in, and we were just in tears we were laughing so hard. Sometimes this failure to connect is just plain funny.

And yet. Even though we were laughing our heads off at the time, it really wasn't funny, either. It was kind of awful, too- not to be able to connect enough to communicate something as simple as a book title. My Grandmother did have hearing aids, and she did use them, but her problem was her nerves were damaged- and it wasn't just that everything was quiet, but it sounded garbled to her. So hearing aids would just make the garble louder sometimes. And over time this hearing loss really took a toll on Grandma- over time we noticed her pulling back from conversations more and more. We would try to include her, but you could just see her struggling to hang in there, and then, after a while she would just retreat into herself.

She would try to hard to connect- but it was so hard. And while we did laugh now and again about it- most of the time it was just frustrating.

Only connect- only, and Forster knew this, it's not that easy.

Well this kind of missed connection, this kind of frustration- this is what's happening in John's Gospel this morning. Last week you heard about Jesus feeding that massive crowd out there in the middle of the desert- 5,000 people not including all the women and children. And if you remember from two weeks back Jesus didn't even really want to be doing any of this in the first place- what he was really

hoping for was some time off, some vacation. So, after he heals all the people and then feeds all the people, this morning he finally takes off again. And maybe NOW he can get some peace and quiet.

Well he must have known the crowds didn't want to let him go, and he must have left in the middle of the night or something, because the crowds don't see him go. It takes them some time to figure it out- but when they do, like the paparazzi they go after him. John says they get in the boats and they go searching for him. Searching for him!

So it's not a huge shock to me that when they finally track him down, AGAIN, that he isn't all smiles and sunshine to them. And he isn't- not by a long shot.

Check it out. The crowds show up asking him when he got there- kind of with the feel of "Hey, where'd you go?" And he immediately jumps on them telling them they're only looking for him because he filled their bellies. And they shouldn't be working so hard for what he calls the food that perishes but they should be working for something he's calling eternal food.

And in response to this they ask what I think is a very understandable question. Namely, they say, "OK how do we do this? How do we do this kind of work?"

And then Jesus pulls the rug out again and says he isn't really talking about work at all but faith, belief. He says you have to trust in the one God has sent.

So first he accuses them of working for the wrong thing. Then when they ask how to do this work, he tells them it really isn't work at all- but faith.

But they hang in there. And then, and admittedly this may be a little dense on their part- especially after the feeding of the five thousand, but they ask Jesus what he's going to do, what kind of sign he's going to do so that they can believe. And they point to Moses saying Moses provided the manna when the Israelites were in the desert. And really, I think this is understandable. The crowd isn't rejecting Jesus- they're actually saying their willing to abandon their beliefs, the beliefs of their families and their communities (no small thing) and put their faith in Jesus- especially if he was like some new Moses. And could he just do something like Moses used to do.

Well Jesus is still not in the mood for them, and he tells them Moses didn't do anything- that *Moses* didn't provide the manna- but it was God who provided the manna. It was God- and he says God is still providing this bread from heaven.

And then, and starts to really feel like Who's on First at this point- the crowds go, "Great! Bread. We understand bread. Well where do we find this bread." And Jesus is like, "No, no, no not where, but who. I'm the bread."

Wha? *Jesus* is the *bread*? This is such a frustrating moment, isn't it? The crowds are talking about bread. Manna. Something you eat. Something you put in your mouth and chew and eat. Bread! There's nothing more simple, more basic than bread.

But Jesus...well Jesus says 'bread', but he isn't talking about normal bread. Oh yeah he uses the word 'bread', but not in any kind of normal way. He says he is the bread. *He* is the bread.

Why? Why is he like this? Why is he being so deliberately unclear- so Yoda like? "Mmm...seek you this bread of God? Found him you have." Why doesn't he just talk like a normal person?

And it isn't just here, either. But all through John's Gospel. Nicodemus asks John how to receive the Holy Spirit- Jesus tells him to be born again. Nicodemus, thinking literally, thinks Jesus is mocking him or playing with him. But of course Jesus isn't talking about literal birth- but figurative, metaphorical birth. And with the woman at the well. She's been standing out there in the hot sun all day drawing up water from a well. And then Jesus tells her he knows about this water that you only have to draw up once and it will last forever. And she's like, well great- where is it? And he says, it's me! I'm the water.

Jesus is always talking like this in the Gospel of John. People are trying to connect with him, but they're always kind of missing each other.

And why? Why is Jesus always making it so hard?

I don't think Jesus is trying to be mean or deliberately confusing. I don't. I think it's that he's honestly trying to connect with these people, with us, and he's trying to tell us what it's like, what it's really like to know him, to walk with him. He's trying to tell them what faith really is, he's trying to put what is beyond words into words. Because for Jesus faith isn't a set of beliefs or practices- it's like knowing a person. And people, even the simplest people- they can never be explained, not completely, they can only be described. People can never be explained- they can only be described. Take the person you love best, know best in the world- you can describe who they are. You can tell someone what they're like. But, this person you love- they will still surprise you. They will still say things and do things that totally surprise you and themselves. This is why Jesus talks the way he does- he wants to describe what faith in him is like without trying to explain it away.

And they want something simple, something that can be boiled down, maybe put into a diagram or power point. They want something *they* can understand. They want to reduce the mystery of Jesus down, to shrink it down until he fits into the way they understand the world. But even the best diagram, the best power point, the best theology- it will always be a little bit wrong; it will get some things right but miss other, crucial elements. So what he's doing is trying to do is to give them something better- something larger. What Jesus is doing here is refusing to shrink *himself* down- and instead he's trying to help *them* grow. He's trying to lift them up in what I might call an engaged confusion. Where they don't totally understand what he's talking about- but they stick with him. Like a dog gnawing at a bone knowing there is something good inside- they stick with them.

Poet Bill Holmes writes about this kind of engaged confusion in a poem about marriage. He writes about how with any two people it's almost like they're from different worlds but that this confusion isn't a bad thing, but a blessing.

A marriage is risky business these days
Says some old and prudent voice inside.
We don't need twenty children anymore
To keep the family line alive,
Or gather up the hay before the rain.
No law demands respectability.
Love can arrive without certificate or cash.
History and experience both make clear
That men and women do not hear

The music of the world in the same key,
Rather rolling dissonances doomed to clash.

So what is left to justify marriage?
Maybe only the hunch that half the world
Will ever be present in any room
With just a single pair of eyes to see it.
Whatever is invisible to one
Is to the other an enormous golden lion
Calm and sleeping in the easy chair.
After many years, if things go right
Both lion and emptiness are always there;
The one never true without the other

But the dark secret of the ones long married,
A pleasure never mentioned to the young,
Is the sweet heat made from two bodies in a bed
Curled together on a winter night,
The smell of the other always in the quilt,
The hand set quietly on the other's flank
The heat carries news from another world
Light-years away from the one inside
That you always thought you inhabited alone,
The heat in that hand could melt a stone.

I'm not sure anyone in that crowd really did understand Jesus- I'm not sure anyone else really has either, really. The dark secret of faith- the one the theologians and the pastors don't like to talk about. Is that faith lies not in understanding. Faith lies not in how well you know the Bible, how often you show up for worship, or even in believing the right things about Jesus. No the dark secret of faith, of long held, old faith, is the sheer pleasure, the sheer pleasure of following after the living Christ and sometimes coming across him in a still moment, or in seeing someone being so kind and beautiful it brings tears to your eyes and you can't say why. And even sometimes in being confused by him- confused by his strange words, confused why he doesn't show up more. But through it all, through it all, staying with him, and then, once in a while, sensing what almost seems like his hand upon your flank, your back, your head- feeling what almost seems like a heat carrying news, good news from another world, and knowing that the heat that from this hand can melt away any stone, any hard place inside of you. **Amen.**