

Back to the Basics

Ephesians 3:14-21

John 6:1-21

I want to share an observation with you; a couple, really. After serving this congregation for a dozen years, I think I can safely share, without fear of serious contradiction, that you, rather “we”, are, as a congregation, well... “weird”.

I looked for a more theological word to use, something in Greek to give it more gravitas, but nothing really approached the meaning I was seeking. Just “weird”.

Let’s put this in context: Since I have been associated with IPC I have met people who visited our congregation and then left again because we were too liberal. After all, we let women read from the pulpit (and occasionally preach!) We don’t have a litmus test of sexual orientation as a prerequisite for participation. We expect everyone to read and wrestle with scripture instead of basing their faith on whatever the preacher, that is, me, has to say.

For some folks, that’s liberal...far too liberal!

But I have known of folks who have walked away because we are too conservative. I spend time preaching on Jesus Christ, and Him as the source of salvation ever bit as much as I spend time on social justice or the political challenges of the day. For some, only issues of social justice are germane. Worse, we do our business, both in the church council and the congregation as a family of faith and not as an efficient business. Conservative! FAR too conservative!

We are also confused in our dogma and doctrine! We have participants who bring their babes-in-arms to communion and put a crumb of bread and a drop of wine on their lips,

even while we have others who would never consider allowing their children to partake of communion until after they were baptized and joined the church, and that not until they were at least 18 years of age.

We have fine folks in these seats who were baptized at birth, as children, as youth and as adults; baptized by sprinkling, or pouring or by full immersion. We've even had people in our church family who were baptized by a laying-on-of hands. We don't have a fixed rule about the right way to do these things and then we have the audacity to say, "Come on in, you are all welcome!"

And do not get me started on the liturgy! Oi! I know of people who have walked away because we are FAR too "old-fashioned"! We sing music written by dead white men and don't have a praise band that can lead us in 24/7 praise choruses at 120 decibels. (You know 24/7, right? 24 repetitions of a 7-word chorus...) We don't have a "praise leader" who stands in front of the congregation to perform the music while everyone else listens. No projections or top-of-the-line technical equipment! Heck, we don't even have a dedicated on-line streaming service for our worship services!

Services like Lessons and Carols? Ancient...probably pre-dating creation itself!

FAR too old-fashioned.

Of course, others have taken a hike because we are WAY too modern! We sing hymns whose composers aren't dead yet! We do services that feature gospel or blues or Celtic music for worship. We allow instruments in the service (bad enough) but not just the organ, but a piano, guitars, a fiddle, you-name-it. Our talented keyboardist may play Bach or something that sounds more like "Christian lounge" music...some of it even toe-tapping! Geesh, it's almost sacrilegious! It's FAR too modern.

It's easy in all of that to lose track of the basics.

I also know of the number of folks how have moved away and written back saying how hard it is to find a place like IPC, where all are welcome, and every form of worship is OK. Where Christ is the keystone, but social justice and inclusivity are a part of the foundation. Where we, as a congregation, attempt to uphold and support every person who walks through that door, no matter their tradition, history or background.

We recognize them as God's children and treat them as such.

It gets confusing, doesn't it? Sometimes we want simple explanations, with rules, structures, and guidelines...the more the better!

That's nothing new. For centuries now, good people, faithful people, people seeking to be God's people have gotten confused, and, in the confusion, confused others. We've made rules or created structures or made "acceptable" and "unacceptable" lists, always in an attempt to make things clearer...but it seldom works. From simple statements of faith to full confessions (all 33 chapters!), we try to define the undefinable, and sometimes we miss the point.

John's Gospel today is a good example; a familiar story of the feeding the multitude. We've all heard the story, we know what it's all about...or do we?

Do you think 5,000 people would venture from home and the only person to make any provision was a small boy with his five loaves and two fish? These people were following Jesus for healing, not because they were starving. They may have been poor, but that doesn't mean they were senseless.

They were traveling a few hours from home. What if some, perhaps many, carried a few of their own provisions?

Perhaps, just perhaps, the miracle here is not the creation of food from nothing, but rather the wonder that a wary crowd of strangers could come together in trust and community and share what they had. They moved from a sense of scarcity and selfishness to a spirit of sharing and abundance.

Perhaps we should rename this miracle the miracle of a small boy's openhearted sharing. Would it be less of a miracle?

We can't go back to the security footage to see what really happened, and even John's Gospel is a bit vague at the moment of the miracle. You know, if Jesus defied the laws of science, I'm OK with that. The parallel between Moses who fed the 12 tribes and Jesus who would be the bread of the world speaks to me. Jesus is my Lord. The feeding of 5,000 is a bold statement!

But He remains my Christ if He did not magically produce bread. It strikes me that the miracle the world needs now is not just to feed the five thousand, but for people to stop living as if their neighbors are just a part of the crowd. We need a communal understanding that doesn't leave some starving while others are hoarding. We need a biblical faith that upholds a wise stewardship of our resources; the wonder of strangers coming together in trust and community, sharing what they have.

That's not liberal or conservative, modern or old-fashioned, it's simply Christian. It's basic.

This isn't new. For centuries the Church has attempted to articulate what it means to be Christian, what it is we believe.

Today we shared one of those statements when we read together the Modern Affirmation of Faith.

Whether it is the Nicene Creed, the Apostle's Creed, the Modern Affirmation or any of a dozen more, each of these creeds and affirmations is an attempt to explain the unexplainable, to put into words what it is we believe.

As a means of celebrating what we share in our faith, these are wonderful...however, as a litmus test of required beliefs, each falls dangerously short. We need to be VERY wary when we go about trying to make exclusive statements about what God is - or isn't.

Like statements of too liberal or too conservative, too modern or too old-fashioned, such statements are by nature limited and tend to get the focus a bit sideways. How? They tend to be focused on "me".

Most of these statements start off, "I believe", assuming that every Christian of good faith believes the exact same thing or SHOULD believe the exact same thing. But what if we are OK with the fuzziness? What if we cannot only live with but thrive in the dichotomy of differences?

Was John's story today a miracle of Jesus feeding 5.000 from almost nothing? Was it a miracle of Grace and generosity exploding God's richness upon all who gathered based on a small boy's openheartedness? Can it be both? Do we dare open ourselves to the premise that God's way will always be beyond our understanding?

Perhaps, just perhaps, we think too much. Every time I have attempted to learn to play a sport at some point I have had to "get out of my head". You know what I mean; it's possible to "think" something to death.

We do that in the Church with labels like “liberal” or “conservative” or “modern” or “old-fashioned”, failing too often to see beyond the label. I suspect that’s not new, we take comfort in the structure because the alternative overwhelms us.

However, there IS an alternative: Welcome to the “weird” church; a church where all are welcomed and blessed by a loving God.

Do you remember what Patrick read to use from Paul’s letter to Ephesus? Patrick, would you please read it again?

Please allow me to re-word that as our affirmation of faith for the weird church. It’s not about all the “stuff” of the Christian faith; that comes, or doesn’t, later. This is about the basics:

Not because we are deserving

But because God loves us.

Not because we are attractive or intelligent or even amusing

But because God delights in calling us beloved.

God decreed that we would be His children,

You and me.

There’s no end to God’s love, no limits

We can never be too dull

Or too smart

Too handsome

Or too gross.

In fact, there’s no escape

God loves us

And calls us family

Blessed are we.