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August 9, 2009

Why Christians Have No Principles

Text: St. John 6: 35-51

The sixth chapter of John is one of the longest sustained narratives in any of the four Gospels. This is the third Sunday we have read from it, and we have two more to go. It is also one of the most dramatic narratives in the Gospels. It swings from the crowd's wild acceptance of Jesus to their doubting him, and ultimately to most of them rejecting him. Within it, Jesus first puts a crowd of five thousand in the palm of his hand by feeding them, but then ends up alienating the great majority of them when they pursue him to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. There he tells them not only that *he* is the real Bread of Life, but also unless they feed on him, and eat his flesh and drink his blood, they will not see eternal life, their birthright from their ancestors.

But it is not only dramatic. Because of the very strong claims Jesus makes about eating his body and drinking his blood, it appears utterly mysterious and nearly incomprehensible. Yet, as John leads us to understand, that mysterious claim is a crucial claim. It is the crux of the faith, the very dividing line between those who write Jesus off as a madman and false prophet, and those who continue to follow him. For that reason, the passage is not only dramatic, it contains, quite deliberately, a crossroads, a crux, of the gospel of Jesus Christ. It contains a choice, and it is about choice, although it also shows us that the choice is not always what we think it is. Let me illustrate how in what may appear at first to be a round about way.

Some years ago, a colleague told me the story of a Bible study class he attended, which was reading the story about the feeding of the five thousand, the first part of the sixth chapter of

John. As the class drew near to its end, and after discussing such things as the discrepancies between John and other Gospel writers on the number of people fed, but never getting to the Bread of Life passages which are the point of the story, the class leader asked the class what they might be able to take home from that day's lesson, what principle for better living they might obtain from the class. He asked for, as one person in the business community informed me it is called, "the take away."

As my colleague related this story, he was quite upset with this request for the "take away." How, he complained, could one even get a principle for better living from a story such as this one? Clearly the whole point of the story about miraculously feeding five thousand people has little to do with helpful "how-to" hints for better living. The point is that Jesus *is* the Bread of Life, and no other bread will give real life. Here is a choice of how one is going to live. There is nothing helpful here at all; there is a challenge and a choice or there is nothing; to turn it into something other than that choice is to make the wrong choice.

I bring up my colleague's rant because it illustrates very well an approach to religious life that far too many attempt, and that far too many preachers encourage. It is an approach to religious life in which what people look for from the Bible or Christian faith in general is simply a set of helpful hints, a set of principles to live by. That is not Christian faith, though.

Since having a set of principles sounds like a noble enough thing to do, let me say what is wrong with it. It is simply that in approaching faith this way, one chooses helpful principles over a living faith, and chooses bread over the Bread of Life. Why is that a problem? It is because Christians have no principles for better living, they have no rules, they have no "take away" from the story. In place of principles they have a living Savior and the presence of his Spirit. In place of rules, they have a vision. They have no "take-away" from the story, but they do have the story.

In fact, they see themselves as part of the story which tells them where they came from and where they are going. Because of all this, not only do they have no principles, they are opposed to principles.

But what is wrong with principles, at least insofar as they are a matter of taking away some helpful hint for life?

Well, consider what is involved in any “take away.” On the one hand, one hopes for something more serious than what one does in taking seashells home from the beach or souvenirs from Disneyland. But, on the other hand, “take aways” usually involve something far less serious – and far less challenging – than having to change one’s life radically because of what you have just read. To take something away in this sense, to have principles in this sense, is like adding another tool to a “tool kit for life.” Which is to say, they help you do the job better; they, however, aren’t meant to make you think about whether the job you are doing is worth doing or not. Yet, isn’t making you think about what you are about in life precisely what the story is all about? Isn’t Jesus in his very strong and very strange claims asking people to reflect on the sorts of life tasks they have set before themselves, and isn’t he asking them to make a choice for a very different sort of job? To take away something to help with the old job is to fail to exercise the choice that is put before one. For in what Jesus is saying to the crowd here he is not trying to add something to an already established way of life. He is telling them that they are at a crossroads, and is asking them to take a new path. He is trying to show them a new path, not trying to just improve the pavement on the old one.

Some years ago, I edited a series of books for a university press. One of the bits of advice that I pressed on potential authors was that readers, professional and lay, on the whole rarely buy books to see how smart the author is. Rather, they buy books because those books have the

potential to help the reader advance his own projects. Thus a book that you expect others to buy had best be helpful, and its success will be measured by that, not by trying to show them how smart you are, not by trying to baffle them. That is good advice to academic authors because that is how and why people read most books. Too often, though, that is the reading strategy people use on the Gospels; they read them to help them with their agendas. But in the case of a story such as John tells, it is the author who needs to set the agenda, not us. This is one book where we really need to see how wise the author is, and need to be impressed by that wisdom.

Look at the problem this way. Americans regard religion as a *very* private thing. It is, for them, private not just in the constitutionally guaranteed sense that the government cannot prescribe religion over anybody's dictates of conscience; it is also private in the sense that it is rarely a matter to be brought into public. Now, one of the effects of seeing religion as personal in this way is, I suggest, a tendency to see it as something that you choose. We choose it and we do with it what we see fit. We choose it because we think it will help us on a path that we have already chosen. When we do that, we do not choose to be faithful or to be in love, but choose religion to help us get what other things we have chosen before, and that we have no intention of ever rethinking. And because we have no intention of reestablishing our priorities then it is clear that we are using religion. It is at that point that God becomes *our* tool, and we are no longer his.

That is the problem with principles for better living, with looking for the "take away." We are rarely actually directed by them; rather, they are things we seek out to help us achieve, to help us succeed. In that case, whatever we count as success can be said to be what we really believe in. Everything else is just a tool to help us get it. So what is it that we want and in which we most firmly believe? – the goods that belong to the City of this World or the ones that belong to the City of God, as St. Augustine put it?

Not that the goods of the City of this World are bad. They are, as Augustine openly admits, fine things and include many virtues. The problem is that if simply contributing to the pursuit of those goals is all that religion is meant for, then that means that there is only bread, but no Bread of Life. It means that there is only sustenance for this life, but no eternal life lived in God's light. It means that if religion is only a matter of principles and helpful hints, then God is no longer a Father who sends his Son to suffer and die to redeem a world that has chosen badly and chosen badly quite often. Instead, at best God is an executive who sends out a training team to lead a seminar.

That very simply is not the Christian faith. For Christian faith is about what God has done in Jesus Christ, and what God has done is about saving us. Saving us from what? From ourselves often and our alienation from the God who loves us, and also from our own choices and the principles, the tools that we have used to realize those choices. But let me also point out that because Christian faith is about saving us, it is also about changing us, and challenging us, challenging us on what we have previously take for granted, challenging our sense of achievement and success. It is about a higher sense of calling.

Let me put this one more way by retelling the story that John tells.

After Jesus miraculously fed the five thousand people who had followed him along the coast of the Sea of Galilee, they continued to follow him across the Sea. Why? Jesus says that it is because they ate their fill of the loaves. That clearly worries him because that isn't a good enough reason to follow him; it doesn't do for them what they need to have done for them. And so Jesus proceeds to tell them to work for the food that endures, the food that God alone can give. But not only does he point out to them that there is a difference between mere bread and the Bread of Life, and they had best be aware of the difference, he pushes the point further by telling them that

he is the Bread of Life. At first, they take this as a mere metaphor, for to their minds surely Jesus is just the carpenter's son. Assuming that he is just dispensing some principle they can take home, they think he couldn't possibly mean what he just said, and so they anticipate some further clarification.

But he does mean what he says. He doesn't clarify, he *pushes* the point, and goes on to claim that they need to eat of his body which is the bread that he gives for the life of the world. This is alone the heavenly bread that gives true life. Of course, this causes an uproar among everybody with principles who has followed him, and we are told that a dispute broke out. We are also told that as a result of that dispute a lot of those who had followed him, quit doing so. Clearly, they didn't get the "take away" they expected.

Who quit because of this dispute? I think it was those who saw *only* a multiplication of bread, and who just wanted a take-away. They were the ones who had no intention of changing themselves at all; they just wanted help in having more of the same. They were the ones who had no vision of a changed world. They were the ones who had no *love* for Jesus.

And who stayed? The reply that Peter gave on behalf of the disciples to Jesus when he asked if they, too, wanted to go away is instructive as to who stayed and why. For Peter simply asks, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life." Which is to say, Peter is not asking for a "take away;" indeed, he knows that what is important here is something that can't be taken away, it is something that simply has to be accepted and lived with. So what he is asking for is simply to stay, for he realizes that it is in staying and listening that true life alone consists. In that reply, he and those like him showed that they did understand what Jesus meant when he claimed that he was the bread of life, and that one must feed on him.

To those who want only principles, and helpful hints for living a life that they have

already mapped out and prioritized, Peter's answer must surely be as incomprehensible as Jesus' own claim about being the Bread of Life. For to want principles to take away is to want to have life apart from the giver of life. It is to want tools and to want to stay in control; it is to want the same thing you already have. Peter, on the other hand, understood that true life could only be had by receiving, by being dependent, by being faithful. And in so understanding he learned to see the fulfillment of life quite differently. He learned that he was not always in charge, not even of his own life. He learned that sometimes it is in listening itself that there is real life. Oftentimes we listen in such a way that we don't hear what is being said because we already have our objections already formed, or because we think we know what is coming. Peter in saying, "Where can we go, Lord? You alone have the word of eternal life," is saying that his life would now consist in listening, really listening.

What Peter understood is the heart of the gospel, namely, that Christian faith is *faith*, which is to say it is trusting, it is eating, it is looking, it is hearing a savior who can change us; it is a matter of vision and love. In that he partook of eternal life. Let us too find true life in the same way. Let us not look to take something away; let us by faith enter into life. Let us not have principles and tools, but let us love.