

Proper 13B: John 6:24-35  
Church of the Good Shepherd  
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### **Changing the Conversation**

As we enter the election season, it strikes me that one of the things that makes for a professional politician is how deftly they are able to change the subject from a topic they don't like to one they do. I was listening to a candidate this past week (I won't say who it was) who was being grilled on something they had said years ago. I was amazed at how smoothly this person was able to shift the conversation from defending himself to attacking his opponent. It was really impressive. I almost didn't realize he was doing it. That's something gifted politicians and PR professionals do well; they are masters of deflection, of changing the conversation.

Now, usually this is self-serving, as in the case of politicians, but occasionally this redirection is helpful, like when it shifts the focus from immediate concerns to deeper issues. That is what Jesus does in today's Gospel lesson this morning. The story picks up where we left off last week—after the feeding of the 5000, John says the crowd figured Jesus would make a pretty good king and wanted to crown him then and there. But Jesus refused that title—and the expectations that came with it. And so he retreated to the mountain and then walked across the Sea of Galilee—to get away from them!

Only the crowd wasn't about to let him go—or to let go of their plans for him. When they finally catch up with him, on the other side of the lake, the first thing they want to know is “When did you get here?” It seems they were afraid they missed out on something by arriving late.

Jesus, being Jesus, sees what's really going on, what's behind their question. They weren't interested in him, but in the ‘goodies’ they could get from him. And Jesus calls them out on it: “Very truly I tell you, you are looking for me not because you saw the signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves.” He recognizes that these people see him as their ‘gravy-train,’ their key to a secure future: “hang with Jesus and get free food and a show.”

We might laugh at their blatant self-interest and crass opportunism. But if we are honest, we are often not much better. We may be better at hiding it, but anytime we come to church to get something other than God—for calm amidst the bustle, for emotional uplift, for confirmation of our prejudices, for help in networking or to find a spouse —then we are doing the same thing as those who flocked to Jesus for the free buffet.

That's not to say that people who come to Jesus for healing or peace or nourishment are wrong for seeking Jesus. Jesus does indeed promise these blessings. But Jesus makes clear, it can't be just these things. If for no other reason than these goods don't last. We may be filled but we will be hungry again. But the problem is bigger than that. As any church that seeks to meet peoples' “expressed needs” inevitably discovers, there's no end to the “needs” people have, no bottom to their desires. Even those churches who manage to offer something for everyone—children's ministry, mom's ministry, youth ministries, men's groups, sports teams, afterschool programs,

homeless ministries, food ministries, multiple music teams—these churches still see people walk away because they don't find what they're looking for.

William Willimon, former chaplain at Duke University, recalls attending a worship service at the magnificent Duke Chapel. They had just heard one of this nation's great preachers. The 150-voice choir had sung two magnificent anthems, backed up by a small orchestra. The place was packed and 1500 voices joined together singing the great hymns of the church. But on the way out the door, coming down the steps, he overheard one student say to another, "Frankly, that didn't do a thing for me." All of that beauty and glory, but it didn't do a thing for him....

This attitude is inevitable when people come to Jesus, come to church, looking to get something for themselves, something they think Jesus or the church or religion generally can give them. But if that is the approach, they will never be satisfied. And in fact, the concern about their "felt needs" often covers up other, deeper needs they have, which they are ignoring.

Bernard Levin, perhaps the greatest columnist of last generation, who was not a Christian, nevertheless observed, "Countries like ours are full of people who have all the material comforts they desire, together with such non-material blessings as a happy family, and yet lead lives of quiet and, at times, noisy desperation, understanding nothing but the fact that there is a hole inside them. And however much food and drink they pour into it, however many motorcars and television sets they stuff it with, however many well balanced children and loyal friends they parade around the edges of it, it aches."

And that ache has become more apparent in recent years. Despite the fact that we live in the richest, freest, most technologically advanced society the world has ever seen, we are far from having achieved universal happiness. We no longer have to worry about having enough to eat, which is good, but now the concern is eating too much. The internet has given us access to more knowledge at our fingertips than could fit in any library, but we use it to look at nude photos. We have more leisure and more access to the arts than ever before, yet we waste our time on online games and TikTok videos. We have a wider choice of potential mates than ever before through dating apps, but fewer people are getting married and fewer are having children. We have more freedom and opportunity than people have ever had on the planet, but we have no idea what to do with it. And so we are "tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of the latest academic theories, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming," chasing after this social movement or that political cause, looking for something, *anything* to give life structure and meaning, seeking to fill the void, the God-sized hole in our lives.

It's like what one Japanese woman said about rice. She said, "In Japan we *need* to eat rice." She explained, "It's like we've got two stomachs: we've got one stomach for ordinary food and one stomach for rice. And however much ordinary food — meat, potatoes, fruit, vegetables — we eat, we don't feel full. We don't feel satisfied until we eat rice." In the same way, we chase after whatever we think will fill us up— relationships, work, hobbies, sports, politics, whatever. But no matter how good they may be, they always leave us with this feeling that something's missing.

That's precisely what's wrong with the crowd in John's story then is that they are looking to fill their empty stomachs but fail to recognize their empty lives. They see their hunger, not as a sign of a deeper longing, but as a need to be satisfied, as quickly and as easily as possible. And so they see Jesus, the wonder-worker, as the best way to get their needs met.

But Jesus refuses to engage with them on their terms and instead changes the conversation. He does this a lot in John's Gospel. People ask him a question and Jesus responds with a non-sequitur, with a response that "doesn't follow." He did this in his conversation with Nicodemus. He did this with the woman at the well. And he does it again here with this crowd.

They came to Jesus looking for him to be their leader and provider of their material needs, their ticket to economic security, political freedom, and affordable healthcare. But Jesus makes it clear that what he offers is not goodies but God. "Give us bread, you demand. But what you really need is soul food, spiritual nourishment. You seek to make me king, but I am king of kings. You want me to work miracles that defy the laws of nature, but I was there when those laws were written. I am not your puppet or your hired hand, I am the Great I AM. And if you want to live, truly live, live a life that is so full it cannot be contained in this life, then look not to bread, but to the bread of life. Look to me. I am the bread that nourishes your soul, the rice that fills up that second stomach"

With that, Jesus shifts the focus from the goods we get from him to himself, from the gifts we get to their Giver. Jesus understands—and wants us to understand—that our immediate needs are important, but they cannot define the conversation. Indeed, if we are to be restored to God, our approach to God needs to change. It needs to change from focusing on "getting saved" to giving our life to God, from "getting to heaven" to living heaven on earth, from being a 'good person' to living a grace-filled life, from "winning souls" to witnessing the Gospel.

And our conversation with the larger society has to change, too. We cannot let the concerns of the surrounding culture define who we are or limit what we do. For a lot of people, you know, the church is largely irrelevant but *occasionally* useful—providing therapy groups, helping the homeless, visiting the elderly, dispensing advice to congress. And some in the church are glad just to have a role, even if it means we are kept on the outskirts of society, catching those who fall through the cracks. But if we are to have any impact on our society, and not just prop up the system, we need to change the conversation.

As pastor Tim Keller says in his book, *How to Reach the West Again*, it is not enough to answer questions about the gospel; we need to question the answers society gives. To that end, Keller identifies seven basic faith assumptions or stories that characterize society. You're surely familiar with them; they come at us in ads, tweets, music, stories, movies, opinion pieces, etc. Here are the seven Keller identifies:

- IDENTITY: "You have to be true to yourself."
- FREEDOM: "You should be free to live as you choose, as long as you don't hurt anyone."
- HAPPINESS: "You must do what makes you happiest. You can't sacrifice that for anyone."
- SCIENCE: "The only way to solve our problems is through objective science and facts."

- MORALITY: “Everyone has the right to decide what is right and wrong themselves.”
- JUSTICE: “We are obligated to work for the freedom, rights, and good of everyone in the world.”
- HISTORY: “History is bending toward social progress and away from religion.”

Again, these are messages, assumptions you hear repeated everywhere today. To reach this culture then, Keller argues, we Christians must expose the flaws in these answers, showing how they don't fit human nature, how they are at odds with our intuitions, and, even more critically, how they don't even live up to their own ideals. To make a difference, to make inroads into society, we must be aware of these assumptions, these basic things people believe, but we must also gently and kindly demonstrate to our friends and family that these beliefs cannot deliver on their promises.

Practically speaking, this can look like asking a friend something like, “How do you know which part of you is your ‘true self?’” Or “Who do you think should define what hurt means?” Or “Why do you think humans should have rights?” By asking questions like these, not accepting the accepted answers but questioning the assumptions, we challenge people to examine their own presuppositions and scrutinize the stories they believe in. Fact is, as fervently as many people hold their beliefs, they rarely examine their consequences, how they overpromise and underdeliver. And so often all we need to do is ask the question. Sometimes all we need to do is what the question Dr Phil is famous for asking— How's that working for you? How well are the accepted beliefs of society delivering on their promise?

Mind you, this is not an excuse to be obnoxious, nor license to deflect the hard questions people ask, as politicians do. Rather it is a call to listen to others, not to the answers they put forward, the felt needs they want satisfied, but to patiently, sensitively, hopefully attend to the deeper needs obscured by the answers that they give. Jesus was a master at changing the conversation, even better than the most skilled politicians. And he challenges us to do as he does, to question answers and to answer the deeper questions behind those answers, steering the conversation always back to him. For, Jesus is the one we all hunger for, who alone satisfies our aching, empty souls and who gives himself as bread for the world. Thanks be to God!