

BLACKSBURG PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
SUNDAY, AUGUST 9, 2009
REV. WILLIAM L. LOVE

THE BREAD OF LIFE

2 Samuel 18:1,5,9-15

Ephesians 4:25-5:2

John 6:35,41-51

In a story about country-and-western singers George Jones (who was known to visit the bottle on occasion and to have to cancel appearances because of it—though fortunately he’s cleaned up his act and his life no longer resembles a bad country song) and Tammy Wynette (who sang *Stand by Your Man* was, for a time, married to him), it says: *He was a bad drinker, and once she hid the car keys so he couldn't drive anywhere for liquor. So he got the riding lawnmower and drove that to the nearest town and got drunk.*

A man named Grady, who sang country-and-western songs at a local tavern on Friday nights, told of his own life: *My wife did that very thing to me and I stole the tractor, but it had a blade cutter still hooked to the rear of it, so it's pretty much the same thing. My name starts with a "G", and my wife's name is Bonnie, and I have got one ugly mug on me. I'm an alcoholic – I get drunk as a skunk almost every other day. People are always trying to get me to quit drinking. The wife even wants me to go to A. A. I have to remind her that it's this that separates me from being your average balladeer. George is a legendary drinker, and as long as he has a jigger of liquor in him I'll have a jigger of liquor in me. ...I tell her, "I probably couldn't even make people cry anymore when they hear me sing if I dried out." And then I tell her to hush up or I'll leave her the way I left Tammy...I mean George left Tammy. [Lisa Walker, *Peas in a Pod, The New Yorker*, 8/8/88, 26]*

Grady, it seems, had the desire (the need?) to connect his life with something – with someone – greater than himself – so that, however painful or tragic or boring or insignificant his life seemed to be, he could escape it by seeing himself as a part of something greater, or seeing something heroic about his life (even if the hero is a tragic figure – a hero nonetheless). So he chose a celebrity, which seems to be the modern substitute for real heroes.

Grady is not alone in his desire to connect his life with something beyond, of which this life is an expression.

* * *

Nicodemus the Pharisee came to Jesus by night. Life as the Pharisees understood it was not enough for him, and he saw in Jesus someone who seemed to be in touch with a life that Nicodemus suspected existed but knew in his own life only as a longing for something that was missing. Jesus told him that one must be born anew to see the Kingdom of God. Nicodemus was confused. How can you be born when you are old? Can you enter the womb a second time?

So Jesus moved him from a biological understanding of birth with a little *b* to a mystical understanding of Birth with a capital *B*. [John 3]

* * *

The woman of Samaria came to the well to draw water. Jesus asked her for a drink. When she challenged him, he said, *If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, "Give me a drink," you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.* She said, *You have nothing to draw with, and the well is deep; where do you get that living water?*

So Jesus moved her from an understanding of water with a little *w* to a mystical understanding of Water with a capital *W*. [John 4]

* * *

The 5,000 had been fed. And they followed Jesus. Feeding 5,000 people with 5 loaves and 2 fish is no small feat. And, if that were all there were (if feeding a physical hunger that would return were all there were), that would be enough to be amazed. And there might be little reason to suspect that there was more.

THE BREAD OF LIFE — 2

Jesus said to them, *You seek me...because you ate your fill of the loaves.* And he begins to talk with them about bread with a little *b* in order to point the way toward Bread with a capital *B*. *I am the bread of life, Jesus said, whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.*

* * *

Christina Ferrare is a former model who was married to John DeLorean (who designed the car with the gull-winged doors that was used in the movie *Back to the Future*). She said: *I always thought that a great way to impel oneself to diet is to eat a few meals stark naked.* An aerobics instructor named Phoebe said of her own life: *I simply do not believe it. I thought I was the only person on earth who did that. ...And people are always telling me I should model. The first time I ever saw [Christina Ferrare], I said, "I feel a familiarity with this person. Two peas in a pod." I usually start eating naked in front of the mirror about five pounds over my ideal. Christina and I probably even get overweight at the same time. If I called her at this very minute and said, "A hundred and fifteen pounds," I bet she'd know exactly what I meant – like twin-speak. Christina was married to a rich man who designed cars. I was married to a guy who worked at a body shop and made really good money. Christina's weakness is pasta, and mine is mashed potatoes. I bet she even keeps a wrinkle diary. Every morning when I get up I count all the wrinkles on my face and body, and record how many there are in my diary. I do this to monitor how my wrinkle creams are working, if I'm getting too stressed or too much sun, etc. Now I'll never feel weird or funny about anything I do. Like the time I got out of teaching my aerobics class by telling the owner of the health club that my whole family had been mass-murdered. Because if I'm as remarkable as Christina, then that must mean she's as remarkable as me. [Lisa Walker, 27]*

* * *

Grady, the country-and-western singer, and Nicodemus and the woman of Samaria and the 5,000 and Phoebe, the aerobics instructor, and we (you and I) seek to connect our lives with something greater than ourselves.

Grady and Phoebe seemed to have found ways that are, at best, silly and, at worst, selfdestructive, destroying the very Self that they are seeking to find.

The psychiatric dynamics of their problems aside, a part of their problem is that they settled for what looked like an answer too quickly. And the answers they found did not answer the craving of their souls.

Grady settled for a delusion of celebrity and liquor, rather than drinking of the Cup, which is the New Covenant in Christ's blood. Phoebe ate diet food naked and counted wrinkles, rather than feasting on the Bread of life that is Christ's body broken for her (and for you and for me). Each settled for life with a little *l* rather than Life with a capital *L*.

* * *

Those who followed Jesus after the feeding of the 5,000 were at the same risk. They were fresh from the experience of eating their fill of bread as a physical reality. And Jesus talks with them about filling their spiritual needs.

I am the bread of life which came down from heaven, he said. *Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph?* they ask. *How does he now say, "I have come down from heaven"?*

* * *

Grady admits to being an alcoholic and, like many alcoholics, can find as good a reason as he needs to take another drink.

As spiritually hungry as these people are, they find as good a reason as they need not to accept the Bread of Life, which would satisfy the deepest longing of their souls.

And our spiritual needs are not significantly different from theirs. Nor is the temptation for us to accept penultimate answers that do not satisfy rather than to see it through to the ultimate answers. The temptation is always to settle for bread with a little *b* and to diet away the flab of life with a little *l* – rather than to seek the Bread of life with a capital *B* and to live Life with a capital *L*.

* * *

THE BREAD OF LIFE — 3

David the King, whose word commanded a nation, was an indulgent father, whose word could not command his own family. David confused love with permissiveness. And his son Absalom, who had avenged the rape of his sister by his half-brother, rebelled against David and tried to overthrow him. Life is not permissiveness; life is not license.

* * *

Neither is life obedience to a strict set of rules.

Religion, I have read, *begins with the sense of wonder and awe and the attempt to tell stories that will connect us with God. Then it becomes a set of theological works in which everything is reduced to a code....* [Bill Moyers in *The Power of Myth*, 141]

A strict set of rules may make life seem manageable, but it squeezes all the mystery out of it. It may make life seem understandable, but it squeezes all the wonder and awe out of it.

* * *

C. S. Lewis wrote a book titled *The Screwtape Letters*, which is subtitled: *How a Senior Devil Instructs a Junior Devil in the Art of Temptation*.

The book consists of a series of letters from Screwtape, the senior devil, to his nephew Wormwood, the junior devil, about how to win his client to the devil's side. By ironic reversal, it tells us truth about our faith.

In one letter (set during World War II), Wormwood has asked whether it will be better for them if the man becomes a Patriot or a Pacifist. Screwtape answers: *Whichever he adopts, your main task will be the same. Let him begin by treating the Patriotism or the Pacifism as a part of his religion. Then let him, under the influence of partisan spirit, come to regard it as the most important part. Then quietly and gradually nurse him on to the stage at which the religion becomes merely part of the "Cause", in which Christianity is valued chiefly because of the excellent arguments it can produce in favour of the British war effort or of pacifism. The attitude which you want to guard against is that in which temporal affairs are treated primarily as material for obedience. Once you have made the World the end, and faith a means, you have almost won your man, and it makes very little difference what kind of worldly end he is pursuing. Provided that meetings, pamphlets, policies, movements, causes, and crusades, matter more to him than prayers and sacraments and charity, he is ours – and the more "religious" (on those terms), the more securely ours.* [C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, 35]

It does not have to be a Cause to which we feel a passionate commitment that confuses us about means and ends. It can be day to day living.

Community developers know that communities that have churches are more stable and desirable communities with a better quality of life. Is Christianity to be valued for the wonderful arguments it can produce in favor of the quality of our life?

If we make faith the means to some other end, then what happens if we do not accomplish our end? What happens is that we try another means and discard the one that did not work. That's what the crowd that cried, *Crucify him!*, was trying to do. They were discarding Jesus as a means who had failed to bring them the end that they sought.

If we make the Cause or quality of life or power or money or sex or country or family or whatever else the end that we seek, then we are asking them to give meaning to life, to be salvation. And, however noble and desirable they may be, they just are not up to that.

* * *

A problem becomes not to confuse means and ends, not to confuse an apparent answer with *the* answer.

The crowd challenged Jesus, *What sign do you do, that we may see, and believe you? Our fathers ate manna in the wilderness; as it is written, "God gave them bread from heaven to eat."* [John 6:30-31] *...Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How does he now say, "I have come down from heaven?"*

Can't we disregard him and settle for the answer we already have?

If we talk of life as a journey, they think they have already reached their destination. Like Grady (the country-and-western singer) and Phoebe (the aerobics instructor), they have not.

Sometimes life is compared to a roller coaster. In some ways, the metaphor holds. In this way it is true: Once you get on a roller coaster, it is at your own peril that you get off before you reach your destination – no matter how much you want to.

THE BREAD OF LIFE — 4

Grady and Phoebe give scant evidence that they even suspect another destination than the one they have chosen. Nicodemus knew there was more and sought it out. The woman at the well was willing to find out there was more.

The crowd with whom Jesus talked was still resisting. *Your fathers ate manna in the wilderness and died*, Jesus said to them.

And there is much in us and in our world that would cause us to resist. It is at our own peril that we disregard Jesus or fail to follow him to the destination.

This life – this world – is the temporal material that we are given in which to experience that connection with eternal life, that connection with God.

The way the poet William Blake said it is: *Eternity is in love with the productions of time.* ["*Proverbs of Hell*", *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*]

This life of ours – this production of time – is a temporal expression of the eternal, a finite expression of the infinite. This life of ours – this life with a little *l* – is connected with Life with a capital *L*.

* * *

I am the living bread which came down from heaven, Jesus told the crowd and tells us, *and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh.*

Take, eat; this is my body which is broken for you, Jesus says to you and to me. *This cup is the New Covenant in my blood. Drink of it, all of you.*

Jesus rides the roller coaster to the end, to the cross.

The end is God. In the resurrection is Life with a capital *L*.

* * *

And we still seek – you and I – an experience of the eternal. We still seek to name the unnameable mystery of life.

We call our journey *hunger*. And we call our destination *bread*.

I am the bread of life, Jesus said, *whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.*