

WPC  
Rev. Ken Sunoo  
July 3, 2011

The Power of Paradox  
Luke 4:1-13; John 6:1-15

As soon as Jesus' identity as God's Beloved Son is announced at his baptism, this identity is immediately put to the test in the wilderness by the devil. Luke's Gospel then says: When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him *until an opportune time*. That is, Jesus was tested not just this once, but throughout his ministry. We find an instance of one of those opportune times in John's account of the feeding of the 5000.

Notice, after this miracle Jesus withdraws because the crowd wants to take him by force to make him king. The next day, the crowd finds Jesus, and he tells them, "Truly, you're looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves."

This is now the second time Jesus resists the temptation of misusing his power to supply bread. The first time, as we read in Luke, the devil challenges Jesus to turn stones into bread, understanding, of course, that Jesus is "famished" after his long fast. At that time, as one commentator notes, the devil was "attempting to beguile Jesus into making the nature of his work too small – satisfying hunger – and the recipients of his work too

few – only one, himself.”<sup>1</sup> Jesus passes that test with flying colors, responding that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.

Now, the stakes have been raised. Instead of providing bread just for himself, Jesus is now tempted to miraculously supply bread for the masses. Furthermore, the people recognize and want to publicly acknowledge that he is, indeed, a king. Surely, this is a much more noble cause. Providing bread for the hungry – who could argue with that? Well, Jesus, for one. He realizes that he’s faced with another temptation similar to the one he overcame in the desert. Jesus’ response to this temptation is not meant to imply that providing bread to feed human hunger is a bad thing; it’s just not the *only* thing. Jesus had not come merely to satisfy our physical hunger; we’re offered every promise of the gospel to nourish and sustain both our bodies and our spirits.

Fyodor Dostoyevsky, in his book The Brothers Karamazov, examines this temptation of Jesus in more detail. In his chapter “The Grand Inquisitor,” Dostoyevsky creates a parable where the devil meets Jesus in a church and accuses him of making a crucial mistake by not giving the crowds the bread they wanted and not accepting their desire to make him

---

<sup>1</sup> Tom Long, *Whispering the Lyrics*, 37.

king. The devil tells Jesus, “You wanted to give the people freedom, when what they wanted was to be happy. Why didn’t you just give them what they wanted?”

What the devil and the crowd did not understand, and what Jesus did understand, is the power of paradox, seemingly contradictory statements that are nonetheless true. Jesus knew that the people would never find true happiness unless they were free to accept God’s gift of love. They thought they would find happiness by seeking after bread, while Jesus knew that if they sought first the Kingdom of God, everything else would follow, including happiness.

Jesus often used paradox in his teaching:

- We find rest under a yoke.
- We reign by serving.
- We’re made great by becoming small.
- We’re exalted when we’re humble.
- We become wise by being fools for Christ’s sake.
- We’re made free by becoming slaves.
- We gain strength when we’re weak.
- We triumph through defeat (crucifixion, resurrection).
- Jesus said, “Those who save their lives will lose them, and those who lose their lives for my sake will save them.”
- And “The last shall be first, and the first last.”

The Bible is full of paradox.

So is life. For instance, during my senior year of college, I suffered from depression. The strange thing about being depressed was that I was tired all the time, even though I was sleeping 12-14 hours every day. I couldn't help feeling drained and exhausted, no matter how much I rested. My counselor finally pointed out for me a paradox: I would never stop feeling listless until I started to *exercise* my body and mind. I needed to exercise in order to stop feeling tired.

Another paradox that really caught my attention was once brought up by Boyd Stockdale, the former Executive Presbyter of Seattle Presbytery. He said, "The church is not here to meet my needs." If we come to church expecting to have all of our needs met, we will be disappointed. The church can't possibly meet all our needs, because our needs are endless. But when we come to church not expecting our needs to be met, and instead we engage in ministry, then paradoxically we find our needs are taken care of. A few years ago, there was a cartoon of a visitor shaking the pastor's hand at the door after church and asking: What, no health spa? No jacuzzi? No tanning salon? And you call yourself a house of worship?

The example is extreme, but we don't have to go far to find folks whose demands – though seemingly more reasonable -- are couched in a

similar tone. Why don't you have this program? That ministry? Where is this group? How about that facility? And if we're really honest with ourselves, we know that most of us (me included) have asked those kinds of questions, too. I guess making lists of our needs – or at least of what we think we need – is easy enough to do.

But again, the paradox is that when we come to church not looking for every one of our needs to be met, but seeking instead to be equipped for ministry, then our deepest needs will in fact be met by God. The one need we're called to meet in this congregation is making sure every single person who walks through this door is nurtured and equipped for the ministry to which he or she has been called by God. If we're doing that, we're doing our job. For it's in serving that we're served. It's in giving that we receive. It's in losing our lives for Jesus' sake that we'll save them. “In an age of spiritual consumerism, when many people regard religion as a therapeutic lifestyle aid, faith is often expected to serve the individual. [In reality], it's the other way around” (Newsweek, June 13 & 20, 2011, p. 44).

There may be some of us here who feel tired and burned-out, overwhelmed by life's challenges. If you're feeling this way because you're already heavily involved in ministry, then perhaps you need to slow down a bit until you can catch your breath. If we're taken on too much at the

church, then it's perfectly fine to take a step back. Make sure that the ministry you're involved in is life-giving, not life-draining.

But if you're feeling this way and you're not actively ministering, then the paradox is that you may need *more exercise, not more rest*. When you're engaging in ministry, *really worthwhile and rewarding ministry*, you're less likely to feel burned out, and more likely to feel revitalized. So find something worthwhile and rewarding to do! Just remember that there's a difference between being burned-out and being happily exhausted.

Let's tap into the power of paradox here at Wallingford Presbyterian Church. Let's test this theory that by stepping outside of ourselves and getting beyond our own personal desires we might in fact find ourselves deeply fulfilled. Let's help one another recognize our areas of giftedness, our areas of interest and challenge one another to find ways to use those here at WPC and in our larger community for the common good. God will bless our efforts, and God will meet our needs. While we may not walk away with the bread we came in for, we will have encountered the very Bread of Life. Amen.