
What Sign Are You Going to Give Us?

A sermon by the Rev. Canon George Maxwell
Proper 14 – Year B

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart find favor in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my Redeemer. Amen.

Imagine that you're in the game of Jeopardy. You've been on a win streak. You've got five in a row but this game is just a little closer than the ones before. Final Jeopardy has arrived and this is your last chance and you decide to go for it all. You bet everything you have and you wait. And then as that window begins to open giving you the answer, your heart leaps for joy because you know those words, you remember those words, you're confident you have the answer. "I am the bread of life." That's what's in the window. "I am the bread of life." And then just at that moment you think, "what was the question?"

What is the question that leads Jesus to make this grand "I am" pronouncement? But then of course after a moment of anxiety, you remember your time at the Cathedral of St. Philip and it all just comes to you. What sign are you going to give us? That's the question. What sign are you going to give us? The context of course, is that Jesus, having just fed the 5,000 with a few loaves and a couple of fish, has been assaulted by the crowd who immediately want to crown him as king. To escape them, he's jumped on a boat, gone across the Sea of Tiberias onto the other side and they follow him there. And this is their question. What sign are you going to give us that you're the one? What work are you going to perform?

Now, you know that these "I am" sayings are characteristic of John. There are seven of them actually and we kind of know them all through our hymnody and prayers and scripture reading. What you may not realize is that each of them is tied to an Old Testament prophet or a festival, a feast day that Israel celebrated so that it has embedded in it a political meaning. What work are you going to perform? So when Jesus says, for example, I am the light of the world, that crowd is hearing that as the Festival of Booths where the imagery of light and flowing water is so prominent, where the passages from the prophets that are read are on that theme, where the work is the work of the Lord in producing the harvest.

Or when Jesus says "I am the good shepherd," that crowd would have understood that that reference was not just to the person who's looking after the sheep in the fields but also to Hanukkah, to the dedication of the temple where that image is used very specifically to celebrate a moment of freedom in between two oppressive regimes. "I am the good shepherd" is just not a reference to a bucolic pastoral scene, it's a reference to work of the Lord which has set Israel free. But the matriarch of all of these passages is this one: "*I am the bread of life.*" For here Jesus is working two of the prominent themes of the Hebrew scriptures. First the Exodus, the establishment of the identity of Israel, the march to freedom through the wilderness. The crowd said, show us a sign just like Moses did when he brought manna down from heaven and gave us bread to eat. And Jesus, focusing on the work, says, you know, it wasn't Moses who did that. That was God who did that. God provided that bread. God did that work.

And then the second theme is the theme of creation. For when Jesus is talking about being the bread of life, what I think would have been heard is the tree of life. You remember that tree in the middle of the garden right next to that other tree, the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, the tree that Adam and Eve ate from, the tree that resulted in their expulsion from the garden. When they ate of that fruit, the forbidden fruit I think, they experienced something new. They experienced an expansion of consciousness and awareness that they didn't have before. That's what God was worried about. Suddenly they could see difference where they couldn't see it before. They weren't sitting simply in the unitive relationship they enjoyed with God where God's work flowed

naturally through them. Instead, they began to see their own identity as separate and apart from other things.

You remember the first thing that they realized? They were naked. They were shamed. They weren't wearing any clothes and then they hid from God. Remember that? In the cool of the evening they hid from God. And it is this awareness of differences which causes their expulsion because they can't, God thinks, be exposed to the Tree of Life in this state. So when Jesus says "I am the bread of life," it is as if he is returning them to the garden, to paradise, to make them ready for the Tree of Life. It's about the work. Not the work of Jesus exclusively but the work of the Father, the work of God. Jesus repeatedly points to God. God is revealed through his work. So what does that mean for us? What is our work?

Cynthia Bourgeault, an Episcopal priest and wisdom writer, offers a more contemporary metaphor. She says we are born with an installed dualistic system. We, like computers, operate by comparing one thing to another so that the way we look at the world is to identify differences and distinguish ourselves from them. And as a result, we go through life with that world view, knowing what is in and what is out, what is good and what is bad, what is light and what is dark. And as helpful as that is in so many ways, it leaves us deprived. It leaves us without a sense of the whole. It makes it difficult for us to figure out how it all fits together. Our work is to upgrade our operating system, Bourgeault says, to a unitive operating system, a system that sees the whole and our role in it, a system that values the whole and each part of it, a system that can accomplish things that the early version of our operating system could not.

But we don't have to write the code. We don't have to generate it actually. All we have to do is consent to it. You know, just like those of you who have iPhones did in the last couple of days. You got that notice. If you'll just plug me in, I'll download the operating system tonight. That Bourgeault says, is what we're confronted with. God is willing to do it. We simply have to consent to the installation, to the upgrade. That is our work. What sign are you going to show us, they asked Jesus. What work are you going to do? Jesus is saying, I'm showing you how to be in relationship with the Father. I'm showing you how to find the presence of the Father in you. I'm showing how to align yourself with that presence so you may live in a way that is alive and gives life.

But to help us know what that looks like, I want to give you three marks of what I think a unitive perspective is. You see, Bourgeault says eternal life, like the kingdom of God, is not a place you go to. It's a place you come from. Eternal life is not a place you go to. It's not a destination point. It's a place you come from. It's a point of departure. Three marks. First, don't judge. Don't use that ability you have to distinguish one thing from another to judge. You can exercise your judgment for decisions you need to make but don't judge other people or even situations, because we know we don't know what's going on in the heart of another. We don't know enough to reach that judgment. That's why we say it's God's.

But let me tell you a story to illustrate this point. It's an old Zen story. There's a farmer, the story goes, and he has two prized possessions, his son and his stallion, and he loves them both more than life itself. One day someone leaves the gate open to the corral and the stallion runs away out into the forest. The local villagers learn quickly that the stallion is gone and they come to comfort the farmer. "This is terrible," they say. "We are so sorry. This is an awful, bad, thing." And the farmer says, "Maybe so. Maybe not. We'll see." Well, the next day his son goes out to find the stallion and he does in a meadow in the middle of the woods, not just the stallion mind you, but another stallion as well. And he is able to lead both of them back to the farmer's corral.

Word quickly spreads through the village and people get really excited, coming to the farmer and saying, "This is great. This is a wonderful thing. You have been blessed. You have two where before you just had one." The farmer responds, "Maybe so. Maybe not. We'll see." The next day his son goes out to break that new stallion who it turns out has more spirit than the son realized. The son is thrown off and breaks his leg badly. It's going to take a long time to heal. You know what happens next. Villagers get the word. They come to comfort the farmer. "This is awful," they say. The farmer responds in his typical manner, "Maybe so. Maybe not. We'll see." The next day the military recruiters come. It turns out there's a war in a distant province and they are recruiting, which is the same thing as putting into compulsory service men of age in the province.

But when they get to the farmer's house, they can't take his son because he's got this horribly broken leg. The villagers return. "This is great", they say. "You've kept your son." "Maybe so. Maybe not," the farmer says. "We'll see." The first mark of the unitive vision, of seeing the whole, don't judge. We don't actually know enough and marking something as good or marking something as bad is only going to keep us from life. Second mark. See the aliveness in everything. See the aliveness in everything. Not too long ago, I watched this beautiful and powerful documentary titled *My Octopus Teacher* and the story is about Craig Foster who's a documentary filmmaker in South Africa.

He has fallen upon hard times. His life is a mess. His depression has kept him out of work for some time and

he decides he'll start snorkeling in a cove at the end of the cliff where he lives. The cove it turns out, is full of cold water and the sun shines into it, making it clear. It's a kelp forest and what he discovers as he dives there, is a young female octopus. And as he comes back day after day after day, they form a relationship. Really. He plays with her and she plays with him. He gets to be part of her life and she becomes a part of his life. And as he feels the aliveness of this animal, he feels the aliveness of himself. She nurses him back to health through this relationship. It's a beautiful thing and it's free on Netflix.

Mark number three. Act for the good of others. You're not judging. You're seeing the aliveness in everything that is. Act for its good. Not long ago I finally consented to do something Lauren had been trying to get me to do for six months and I watched Ted Lasso. Now Ted Lasso is on Apple TV so I had to go get a subscription. I did this for you. Hilarious. Ted Lasso is a character who is constantly acting for the good of others in often awkward and hilarious ways. As the series starts out, he and his wife are having marital challenges and their therapist has suggested that they, or at least she, might need some distance. So Lasso who is a football coach in Kansas, accepts a job with a soccer team in England to give her distance, 4,000 miles of distance, and that leads to a series of chaotic bumbles.

He doesn't know anything about soccer. They don't even want him there. He makes one mistake after another. He doesn't even care about winning, he says, just about developing the men that he is coaching. But every moment of every episode no matter what the context, Lasso is acting for the good of the one standing in front of him. And as this happens over time, a community forms. They see themselves in a way they couldn't face before. The truth of themselves doesn't seem so threatening to them because he is there, pointing out their life. There is one star of his team and maybe only one actually, who is a pathological narcissist and he cannot spell pass. So in a climactic moment in a very important game, he's coming down the field, the wing is wide open, he refuses to pass, his shot is blocked and they lose. The team wanders off the field heads down. The star is traded to another team.

Over the course of the next year, Lasso builds up the team and when they come to their final big game in that season, you have great expectations. And guess who the star is of the other team? The same guy who was traded. And guess how the climactic scene plays out? There he is at the end of the game coming down the field to score the winning goal. Everybody knows he's not going to pass. They converge on him and what does he do? He passes the ball to the wing who's wide open, who scores the goal. Lasso's team loses. What does Lasso do? He writes the guy a note and he says, "Good pass." Everything this character does is to bring out the life in those around him. It's the third mark I think.

These marks are not intended to be exhaustive, simply illustrative, but I hope you can see in them the constant bringing out of life that gives us our own life, eternal life when we do the will of the Father. When we find the presence of God in us, align ourself to that presence and act out of it. That, Jesus is saying, leads us to the Tree of Life. It's not that we've forgotten the lesson of differences that we learned from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, it's that we now see them in the context of the whole, through the connectedness of all that is created, through the love of God for us and for others. "I am the bread of life," Jesus says. What's the question? What sign are you going to give us? Jesus is that sign. Not his miracles and works but his mere being, his relationship with the Father that lets him be in relationship with all of creation.

And he is inviting us into having that same relationship with God, giving us the keys to the same kingdom of God, showing us the way to experience the same eternal life that he enjoyed. All we have to do is consent to the upgrade and start from a unitive perspective. Start from seeing everything as a whole. Eternal life is a point of departure, not the point of arrival.

Amen.