

Where Jesus is Pointing

A Sermon on John 6:56-69 by the Rev. Philip Major

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There are some truths that can be expressed directly. In chapter 13 of the Gospel of John Jesus says to his disciples, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples." These words have direct, literal meaning. These are basic instructions for how we are supposed to treat other people.

But there are truths that cannot be expressed directly or literally. Jesus is trying to move people to an understanding of our relationship with God that is deep and complex. It cannot be fully described with words. Especially in the Gospel of John, Jesus' words often point us to the truth, but they do not directly convey God's truth. Words cannot completely convey the meaning of our relationship with God. In order to tell about our relationship with God we need words that are like poetry. The Gospel of John is full of words that are like poetry.

For instance, in chapter 1 Jesus is *the light of all people. Jesus is the light that shines in the darkness, and the darkness cannot overcome it.* Is Jesus literally casting off rays of light, like these electrical lights hanging in our sanctuary? No, Jesus brings a different sort of light, a light that lights our way in the middle of a sunny day as well as in the middle of the darkest night.

There is a sort of spiritual darkness that can overwhelm us. We can feel like we are trapped, unable to move because of a spiritual darkness that can paralyze us, even on the sunniest day. Jesus is like a light that is much more powerful than one of these lightbulbs. The light of Christ is powerful enough to lead us through times that are darker than the darkest night. But this truth cannot be easily expressed with words. So we say Jesus is the light that shines in the darkness.

In chapter 3 Jesus says to Nicodemus, *No one can see the kingdom of God without being born again.* Nicodemus is puzzled by this. He asks, *Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?* No, that is a ridiculous idea.

Jesus is pointing to a truth about our journey with God. It seems that every person comes to a point in their life where they realize they cannot make it on their own. Each one of us needs some sort of restart. We come to a place where we say to ourselves, "I need to leave behind some of that stuff that used to be part of my life." This is the truth that Jesus is pointing to when he says, *No one can see the kingdom of God without being born again.*

In chapter 10 Jesus says, *I am the gate and I am the good shepherd.* Is Jesus a literal, physical gate? In what way is Jesus a shepherd? A shepherd stands near the sheep. A shepherd fights off the wolves and coyotes and bears who would come into the sheepfold and attack the sheep.

These words cannot be understood to be literally true. No matter how much I love Jesus, he is not standing somewhere near me guarding me from physical danger. But these words point to a truth about the way God watches over us. This truth is difficult for us to understand. God watches over us and guards over us in a way that is like a shepherd. This idea is rich in describing what God does and in describing what God does not do.

Just like a shepherd and a flock of sheep, God does not determine our movements. God does not give us directions every moment of our lives. God does not tell us where to stand or when we should lie down and sleep. Like a shepherd with a flock of sheep, God is near, but not holding us on a leash. God is standing at a distance, because we are independent creatures. We make our own decisions, but God

tries to protect us from the greatest danger. This is the truth Jesus is pointing to when he says, *I am the good shepherd*.

Then in chapter 15 Jesus says, *I am the vine and you are the branches*. These words cannot be understood to be literally true. Jesus is not a plant. We are not literally connected to Jesus the way branches are connected to the vine.

But the words point to a truth about our relationship with God. Jesus invites us to be directly connected to God. This was a big change from the way people thought about God before Jesus' time. So Jesus uses a dramatic image that is easy for people to understand.

We are invited to be connected to God and to each other, the way branches are connected to one another and to the vine. The connection will not be physical, like a stem or a sturdy grape vine. The connection will be spiritual.

All of this is the context for Jesus words in chapter 6. *I am the bread of life. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them*. Given all of these other passages in the Gospel of John, do you think there is any possibility Jesus meant that these words were literally true?

Some of the first disciples who heard these words were confused. They thought Jesus was talking about cannibalism. I can understand why they were confused. Once again, Jesus is pointing to a truth that cannot be explained easily or directly. This is one of the most difficult truths about Jesus. That is probably why the people who arranged our readings in the lectionary have given us five weeks of passages from John chapter 6, all based on the theme of Jesus being the bread of life.

Since it makes no sense to think of Jesus being a literal loaf of bread, perhaps we might come closer to understanding the truth by considering a series of questions: Even after we have a good meal, do we find we are hungry for something that will sustain us? Do we find that communion sustains us in some way? How does communion sustain us? Do we sense that we are somehow living in Christ when we participate in communion?

Regardless of how we answer these questions we can probably agree that people are hungry for something that sustains us in a way that is more powerful than food.

You might have noticed that people seem to get busier and busier as they have more power and wealth; when we have all of the food we could ever need we become more desperate to find something that will truly satisfy us. We are busy looking for something. We are hungry for more than bread. God gives us something that will truly sustain us. This is the truth Jesus is pointing to when he says, *I am the bread of life. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me*.

We are on a journey with the one who created us. We will never make any progress on the journey if we demand certainty. We will never make any progress if we expect to explain everything with literal words, with simple direct physical explanations. This is what Jesus is talking about when he says, *It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless*.

Our journey is a spiritual journey. Our journey with God requires us to live with uncertainty. Our journey is a journey deeper into this activity we call love. Love is never about certainty. Love is about a deeper connection, a connection that cannot be described directly or literally.

So be aware that there will be times when you do not know for certain. Look to where Jesus is pointing. It is a place and a relationship we will never fully understand, something we will never fully describe. Instead of sitting secure in our broken certainties, take a step forward into the love that is beyond our understanding and know that you are sustained by the one who created you.