

Why Jesus would Never be Voted 'Mr. Congeniality'

John 6:22 – 27

Fairview Evangelical Presbyterian Church

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People come to Church for all sorts of reasons.

²⁶ Jesus answered them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves.

One of my favorite church promotional images shows a standard large one hundred-cup coffeepot: underneath the caption reads: '**Free Coffee. Everlasting Life. Yes, Membership has its privileges.**'

I know that people come to worship for all sorts of reasons. Who knows, maybe some come for the coffee. I know of one congregation that serves a large community of refugees many of whom come to worship each week for the snacks, biscuits and cookies that are served afterwards with the coffee. Some come for the music: some to sing, others to listen. High on many people's lists for reasons to go to church is to see their friends. A few come because of the architecture. I heard of a man who was filling out an information form and when he came to the line that said "**Church Preference**" he wrote "*red brick.*" In an international setting some come to improve their grasp of English. Some come out of a desire to meet foreigners. Others come in hope of meeting eligible members of the opposite sex. Some come for the preaching while others come in spite of it. Some gather for worship out of long established habit. Others come out of curiosity. Some like the warmth and friendliness. Others choose their place of worship in a search for anonymity. Children come because their parents bring them – a reason that applies to some spouses as well! I have known a parent or two who came to worship because their child insisted upon it. Some come because they have signed on to do a job as lector, usher, Sunday school teacher, or scripture reader. Some people come because certain churches have achieved a positive reputation and prestige in the community. People worship there to be seen and noticed by their neighbors and co-workers. Sunday morning becomes a good place to swap business cards or recruit new clients. Obviously, some reasons why people come to Church are better than other reasons. I learned long ago that people come to worship for all sorts of reasons over which I have no control as pastor. And, some reasons people come to church are better than others.

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²⁷ Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you. For on him God the Father has set his seal.”

One of the ways in which we humans flatter ourselves is by thinking that we are each on our own individual search and quest for God. We believe that it is the nobility of that spiritual quest that will eventually brings us to a particular

religious or faith understanding. God is playing 'hide and seek' with us. We believe that it is our job to ferret out the hidden knowledge of him. God hides, we seek. We should not flatter ourselves so. In our natural state we run **from** God not **to** him. In fact, in our natural state, we are more like our human parents, Adam and Eve, hiding behind the fig tree in the Garden of Eden. We do not search for God. We hide from him. In our guilt, we fear what it might mean when we do encounter him.

For this reason, most of the time, when we come into God's presence in worship, we do so, at least initially, for some other reason. Something other than a hunger for God brings us. Another church promotional image I am fond of shows a smiling baby. The caption underneath asks, '**Will it take a miracle to get you back to church?**' I have known many folk who have come to God initially because they were searching for a place to hold the wedding or a place to get junior baptized (or dedicated). These may not be the best reasons to enter into a church, to be sure, but they are preferable to waiting until six strong men bring you back to church one last time.

The fact that people may come to worship for wrong reasons is not in any way discouraging to me as a pastor. God draws straight lines with crooked sticks. He uses our corrupt motivations nonetheless to draw us to himself. He brings us to himself in order to teach and train us and to give us the right motivations and the right object for our faith.

In our passage today we see crowds of people coming to Jesus. They are actively seeking him out and searching for him. When they find him they ask, "*Rabbi, when did you get here?*" They have been tracking him and trying to figure out his movements and intentions. Does the level of their effort and action mean that they are inspired by the right motivation? No. Jesus tells *them* "***I tell you the truth; you are looking for me, not because you saw miraculous signs but because you ate the loaves and had your fill.***" He knows their motivation. The crowds see him as a first century food truck. They want their ticket to the proverbial free lunch.

Jesus' rebuke is a relatively gentle one. After identifying their inappropriate motivation he gives them specific correction and guidance. "²⁷ ***Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you.***" "You have come to me for one reason," Jesus says, "but now I tell you to put in your heart on another, better, reason. Seek the food of eternal life."

Every now and again I have been approached by church members expressing their concern and indignation over their discovery of the fact that people may come to the church worship from motives that are less than honorable. Usually the issue is raised with me in hopes that I might rebuke the person or persons in question for the absence of proper spiritual motivation in their church participation. I prefer to follow the example of Jesus as we see it in

this passage. In this passage our Lord identifies the reality of the presence of motivations that are not the best – just as I have sought to do in this message – while at the same time pointing his listeners toward the more appropriate and meaningful values they currently are lacking – something I seek to do every Sunday in our worship in general and the message in particular. Rebuke of a wrong motivation has its place, but it is, ultimately, less important than learning to replace it with a right motivation. This, of course, is exactly what Jesus does when he questions and instructs the crowd in this passage. When we come to Jesus of Nazareth, it is essential that we learn to read the signs that tell us that he is in fact Christ the Lord.

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²⁸ Then they said to him, “What must we do, to be doing the works of God?” ²⁹ Jesus answered them, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.”

What Jesus says to the crowd is that they are focusing on the wrong thing. They have focused on the physical food he provided. They should focus on the spiritual food he will provide. He wants them, and us, to understand that the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand is a sign. The end of the miracle is not the food or satisfied bellies. It points to something in the same way that signs point us in the direction we wish to go in. Jesus is saying ‘*look at the sign and understand its meaning.*’ The key is to see behind it. It is a sign. It points beyond itself.

Imagine a medieval painting or a Byzantine icon. One thing that immediately strikes us moderns when we view such art is its *unreality*. The persons in the painting often have golden halos about their heads. In some, the perspective may be greatly distorted in order to emphasize the important persons of Christ, Mary or a specific saint. They are large whereas the other, lesser, figures are quite small. The faces are painted in a very flat manner de-emphasizing their humanness. Often the characters are wearing or holding specific identifying symbols. St. Peter holds the keys to the kingdom. John the Baptist wears a coarse skin cloak. St. Nicholas carries three golden balls. Though it is not always obvious, in medieval paintings and iconography, if you look carefully you will note that the painter has painted his subject on a ground, not a background. The difference is important. A ground is like the wallpaper on your computer screen. It is simply there. Upon it everything else gets placed. A background, however, attempts to give the illusion of nature. The conventions of medieval sacred art required religious subjects be painted on a ground in order to highlight their spiritual significance and importance. The absence of natural reality was a means of reminding the viewer that what was being portrayed was a spiritual truth, a spiritual reality.

It is important to remember that the medieval artist did not paint in this unreal manner because he lacked the skill or talent to paint realistically. The

medieval artist had a specific reason for painting in this somewhat unreal manner. His purpose in painting was to communicate spiritual reality. He made an important distinction between nature and grace, between the world of the seen and the unseen. What he sought to capture in his painting was the reality of grace, a spiritual reality and, importantly, to communicate that reality to you, the viewer. He portrayed these spiritual realities through the techniques discussed. Their very unreality immediately communicates to us that the significance of this person in the painting is spiritual. A halo tells us that the person we are looking at is St. Peter from the Bible and not Peter the fishmonger who lives down the block.

Medieval artists understood that the spiritual gives meaning to the material. They believed that if you attempted to communicate spiritual reality in a natural setting then nature would eat up grace. Put differently, the spiritual meaning will be swallowed, and lost, in the natural setting. In the history of art this is exactly what happened. With the advent of the Renaissance the rules of painting changed. Now subjects, even religious subjects, were painted in natural settings. They were shown in the world as it is. Over time it became ever more difficult to portray spiritual realities in art. For example, the paintings of Rembrandt are masterpieces of beauty. Rembrandt himself was a Christian. However, the spiritual meaning behind them is not always obvious. As one example his painting of the presentation of Christ by Pilate would be quite inscrutable if it were not for the title. Absent the title it is just a crowd of people. The natural world has engulfed and swallowed the spiritual meaning of the painting. Nature has indeed eaten up grace.

Because of the tendency of nature to “eat up grace,” it is important to remember that the most important things in life are unseen.

The most important things in life are unseen

³¹ Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’ ” ³² Jesus then said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but my Father gives you the true bread from heaven.

It is the spiritual that gives meaning to the material. A life that is lived focused upon the material is blind to the meaning and value of the spiritual. The universe is closed. The cosmos is all that is, and was, and ever will be. And that is not much. There is a cliché that condemns Christians for being *so heavenly minded that they are no earthly good*. I think that misses the point entirely. C. S. Lewis points out that historically those Christians who have been most beneficial to the world have, in fact, been those who were most focused upon heaven. Being mindful of God, heaven and the spiritual side of life is a good thing. If you focus on the spiritual side of life, you get the material side as well. If you focus only on the material, you will ultimately lose both.

This is one reason why, as your pastor, in my preaching and teaching, I deliberately seek to teach and preach Christian doctrine and doctrinal understanding. We live in an age in which there is no place for truth. We want 'practical' Christianity. We are driven by 'felt' needs. We run our lives based on our 'feelings' for God and other humans. Doctrine is valuable and necessary because it serves as the foundation for our lives and our understanding. It informs and guides our thoughts and actions. My goal as your pastor is to assist you in building your life upon the firm foundation of truth and right understanding. I once preached a sermon in which I explained the difference between Supralapsarianism and Infralapsarianism. On the surface you might think: '*oh, there's a yawner, for sure.*' Yet in the weeks after I preached that sermon I had many people, from teenagers to older adults, tell me how helpful and meaningful that message was to them.

Sunday during worship is the most important hour of the week. Do you believe that? Is Sunday during worship more important than your work, your studies, or your time at the ballgame this weekend? It is. Sunday is the most important hour of the week. But in saying that it is the most important hour of the week I am not suggesting that we be like the prophet Samuel living the bulk of our lives at the church in the same way he lived at the ancient Jewish Tabernacle. No. Sunday is the most important hour because it gives meaning to all the other hours. It is the time set-aside for us to learn to see the unseen things, to learn to read the signposts that give meaning, value and direction to our lives.

Why have you come to Christ?

³³ For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world."

So, permit me to ask you, '*why are you here today?*' Why have you come to church? Why have you come to Christ? Be honest. And be wary of giving yourself more noble motives than are the case. But our motivation is only a small part of what God intends for us this day. Whatever your motivation may be in coming to this worship service at this time, it is also true that God has brought you here. It is not enough to ask '*why have I come?*' We must also ask, '*why has God brought me here?*' Our motivations may be suspect and corrupt but his purposes are worthy and pure.

There are many things that we must learn and many things that God must teach us. But at the center of all of those things is God's intent that you and I grow in our understanding of the meaning, greatness and nature of the person of Jesus Christ. Christ is at the core of what God intends for us. The people in our story came looking for Christ, but because of their wrong motivation they ran the risk of being satisfied with too little. Jesus tells them that they came looking for more food but that he can give to them so much more.

There once was a tourist in Switzerland who wished to see the home where the famous theologian Karl Barth lived. He had an address and was on a bus when he began talking to the stranger across the way. When he realized that the stranger was about to get off the bus at the same stop he asked him if by chance he knew the famous theologian. The man replied that he did and that he shaved him every morning. The visitor was ecstatic that he had come to Switzerland, found Karl Barth's home and had even met the famous man's barber. He left Switzerland on his way rejoicing at his good fortune. The only problem was the fact that the man he had met on the bus was Karl Barth himself! He had been satisfied with too little. There was much more that could have been his.

Do not make the same mistake with Christ. Do not be satisfied with too little. One function of the signs is to tell us that there is something exemplary about the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Ordinary people do not feed crowds of five thousand with two loaves and a few fishes. That sort of power belongs to God himself. This is why miracles, in this sense of the word, do not occur today. This miracle was a sign. It pointed to Jesus. It declared that he was the Messiah. He is God's Son. He is God incarnate. Only God could do such a thing. Jesus tells us this explicitly. He tells the crowd that "*God the Father has placed his seal of approval*" upon him. What was the seal of approval? It was the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand itself. A seal of approval indicates authenticity. Such a seal guarantees something to be genuine. Jesus' ability to do such a miracle is the necessary mark that he is genuine. Were miracles of this sort to occur today it would confuse things. If someone else had this power we would have to wonder whether we ought to worship him as well. The miracle authenticates the message and the messenger. It is a sign that points to the unseen reality that stands behind. Jesus of Nazareth is the Jewish Messiah. Jesus the carpenter's son is also the incarnate Son of God. Jesus the Rabbi who provides food in the wilderness will give to those who ask of him the food of eternal life.

Whatever may have been your motivation in coming to worship this morning, it is God's intent in bringing you here to reveal these truths to you. You might come for one reason. God has brought you for another. Turn to Christ. Believe on Christ. Place your faith in Christ. Cling to him, for he is the way of salvation.

Say "Amen" Somebody!

John 5:22 – 34

²² On the next day the crowd that remained on the other side of the sea saw that there had been only one boat there, and that Jesus had not entered the boat with his disciples, but that his disciples had gone away alone. ²³ Other boats from Tiberias came near the place where they had eaten the bread after the Lord had given thanks. ²⁴ So when the crowd saw that Jesus was not there, nor his disciples, they themselves got into the boats and went to Capernaum, seeking Jesus.

²⁵ When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, “Rabbi, when did you come here?” ²⁶ Jesus answered them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. ²⁷ Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you. For on him God the Father has set his seal.” ²⁸ Then they said to him, “What must we do, to be doing the works of God?” ²⁹ Jesus answered them, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.” ³⁰ So they said to him, “Then what sign do you do, that we may see and believe you? What work do you perform? ³¹ Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’” ³² Jesus then said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. ³³ For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” ³⁴ They said to him, “Sir, give us this bread always.”