

Jesus in Hard Times
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Here we are, at the next to last Sunday for this pastorate and my last go-round at an outdoor service. It will be hard to top the one last year, when we were out in this very place, and right in the middle of the sermon a guy in a red pickup truck drove by. He could have said all kinds of things to us Christians gathered in worship, but what he said was “Go Jesus.” I kind of wanted to end the sermon right there.

It was a great moment, a wonderful moment. Ministry and life in the church are filled with great moments, some like that, some better, some not as wonderful. You get the opportunity to share a lot of wonderful things with people as their pastor, and they get to share some things, too, if they trust you enough and the spirit and the flesh are both willing. But ministry and life in the church is not always like that. Just like Jesus had his share of grumblers and complainers, so there are those who grumble and complain in the church and at the church. ‘Oh, it’s not like it used to be’; ‘this used to be a great place to come but it’s all different now, there are all those kinds of people here, people who don’t think like I do’; ‘it was a lot better when so and so was here, or when so and so left.’ Much has been written about ‘Clergy Killers,’ those people who take some kind of sick delight at verbally shooting at ministers. But I also know that there are enough grumblers and complainers on the other side of the pulpit to know that it is not all one-sided.

Life in the church is like life everywhere – it has its wonderful, engaging moments, and it also has those moments you would love to forget. There are those people whose souls you have touched, and others you want to keep your distance from. It is filled with the right words spoken at just the right time, and the worst words spoken in the worst possible way.

Grumblers and complainers attend church just like anyone else, because, let’s face it, the grumblers and complainers are us. I am one and so are you. We are all part of that, part of the fabric of the church which is wonderful and exasperating at the same time. I guess that’s why the prayer of confession is so important, and why in our faith tradition it is so early in the service. It is because we need it so much. We need it because we know that we have all been complainers and grumblers, and we all need the opportunity to say that we don’t want to always be this way.

One of the things I will miss the most about this area will be Lake Erie. I have truly enjoyed going by the lake, either by car or by foot, and taking in the way it changes. Sometimes the shallowest of the Great Lakes can be as still as a pond, clear as glass. Then it stirs up a little bit as a system moves through. But then it gets really interesting when a big storm goes over the area, and the whitecaps come up like so many shocks of wheat. I can remember many a day coming out into the parking lot and listening to a great big roar as the lake churned up over

there. It was such an attractive sound that I would drive over to Lake Road just to see Lake Erie in what I think is its real moment of glory; when the waves were pounding and you knew that there were forces at work that were beyond the ability of any human to control.

Those times were impressive, but scary, too. I always wondered if there was anyone still out there on the water, and if so I hoped that they would make it to shore okay. But the comparison with life in the church continues to fascinate me. There are times when the church is nice and serene, and everyone gets along so well. And then there are other times when people are at each other's throats, when the theological differences are threatening to tear us apart and we wonder how are ever going to make it to whatever shore God has in mind for us. But the thing to remember is that, just as the lake looks its most impressive when it is in the middle of a big storm, so can the church. It is often the big disputes that determine just how vibrant a body of Christ we really are; are we really going to love each other even when we don't agree, are we really going to care for each other even when we have let each other down?

The time that a pastor leaves can be a stormy time, as we have mentioned before. But the storms can be especially difficult as the people of a congregation start to come together to decide where they are going. Some may have been favorably disposed toward the former pastor, and others not so; and then there are others who come back to the church now that there is someone else in the pulpit. In such a time it can be easy for some folks to want to defend the previous pastor, and give the returning members a bit of a cold shoulder for leaving. But that is not really helpful. At a time like this the congregation needs to come together, to forgive each other, to work together, and to pray together, as they move into uncharted waters in a stormy time.

The congregation can do this because its salvation, its sense of wholeness, is not in a pastor. It is in the One who is the Bread of Life. When Jesus called himself that, there were all kinds of grumbling people; who does he think he is, calling himself the Bread from heaven. We know who he is, he is Joseph's boy, we saw him running around here when he was a little kid, we know who his folks are, we know where he came from, we know all about him. The grumbling came because they thought they knew all about who Jesus was. But they only knew what they thought they knew, and they let that knowledge, such as it was, keep them from learning what was most important about him.

If they were really open to what Jesus was saying they would have heard some things. They would have heard that when a person comes to faith it is not their accomplishment. We have heard all kinds of stories from folks about their conversion experiences, about how messed up they were until they finally saw the light of day and came to faith, and everyone marvels at their great faith. We can forget Jesus' words in the 44th verse: "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws them to me..." This means that it is God who is the main one at work in those conversion experiences. It is not the person's great faith, or lack

thereof, that gets them to where they need to be. God is at work in us, drawing us closer to God, even though we may not realize it at the time.

The second part is that God not only draws a person close; but God gives a few lessons along the way. In quoting Isaiah, Jesus says "Everyone will be taught by God." We may not always be aware of what the lesson is that we need to learn, but if we did that wouldn't make it much of a lesson. It is those things which surprise us, which catch us off guard in which we most feel God's presence and God's teaching. Sometimes the lesson we need to learn is something new about our faith, some doctrine or facet of church life that we need to be clearer about. But more often than not what we need to learn is a lesson about ourselves, or about someone else. God instructs us in lessons about each other – about really listening to one another, rather than the unrealistic expectations we have about someone that make real communication so difficult.

The third part is the toughest. Jesus says at the end of the section in which we read, "the bread that I will give them is my flesh, which I will give so that the world may live." This was the verse that led all kinds of people to dismiss Christianity as being a religion of cannibalism. But there is more here than a wooden reading of Scripture. Jesus is not talking about ripping off his flesh for people to eat. He is talking about giving of himself so that others may live. He is talking about life as a Christian, which very often is giving of ourselves so that others may experience the fullness of life. Sometimes that means a minister keeps his or her mouth shut so that people can come to terms with an issue on their own. Sometimes it means giving up our own opinion for the life and health of a faith community. Sometimes it means remembering that conflict does not always mean a danger to our existence; it could be the very vehicle of grace that we need for new life.

In our times of entitlement, in which people think they deserve all of the great things in life, this can be a very hard lesson. In our time - no less than in Jesus' day - there are those who fall away because he doesn't give us everything we want. But there is a different kind of life that Jesus calls a person to live. It is a life based on loving, on serving, on giving, not a life based on taking what's mine because I'm entitled to it.

In an interesting reflection on this text on the internet, Barbara Cawthorne Crafton wrote, "Take and eat, Jesus says, and let your simple bread become me. Don't let a single thing in your life, however ordinary a thing it may be, remain untouched by your new life in me. Don't think for a moment that it is an ordinary thing; there are no ordinary things. Allow your eternal life to transform *this* life, so that the two are one thing, a seamless garment."

The life of following Jesus is not easy, for a minister or a layperson. But when we accept that fact, and let Jesus be our Bread of Life, then we can stop sniping at each other for our differences. Our oneness is in Christ, who is our Bread of Life, the Bread that not only feeds us, but unites us with him and with all of the others he has called on that journey. Amen.

Bible text is John 6:35, 41-51. ©2009 ALPC