

John 6:24-36

 In the movie *Legally Blonde* - which, let's admit, is not one of the great classics of American cinema - there is, nevertheless, a slightly interesting dynamic between the main character, played by Reese Witherspoon, and Matthew Davis, who plays her boyfriend and then ex-boyfriend in the movie. At the beginning of the movie, Witherspoon and Davis are in the final year of college, he's pre-law and she's pre-marriage.

The main plot, such as it is, gets set in motion when the happy couple are at a dinner where Witherspoon is expecting to get a ring but where she, instead, gets dumped. And the reason for her being dumped is because her boyfriend has legal and political aspirations which, in his view, will require a "different" sort of girlfriend, someone who is more serious and substantive. In short, his "commitment" to her is based upon what she can "do" for him, or what she can potentially "do" for him and his career. Now that he has gotten all that he thinks he can out of this relationship, it's time to move on.

Understandably, this is devastating for Witherspoon who at first retreats into a world of self-pity and chocolate. And then, not so understandably, she happens upon the "brilliant" idea that she will follow Davis to Harvard law school to win him back, and to show him that there is more to her than he thinks. Now, why anyone would go to such lengths for such a total loser as Davis the movie does not bother to explain but, in the interests of preserving a fairly weak plotline, the director expects you to accept this as completely plausible.

And so, in spite of her not being a pre-law major - and not even close - she studies hard, gets a great score on the LSAT, and is accepted into Harvard where she learns, the hard way, that perhaps some of her ex-boyfriend's perceptions of her are not entirely off-base. Perhaps she has lived a somewhat shallow existence.

At any rate, in what is possibly the most telling scene of the movie - at least as far as I'm concerned - Witherspoon has turned a corner and is beginning to excel in her law school classes and finds herself at a party with Davis, trying to strike up a conversation with him in the hopes of his seeing that she is a changed person, and now worthy of his so-called love. She has been somewhat thwarted in this endeavor because, as a result of a cruel joke, she was told that the party was a costume party and so has dressed accordingly.

And, while I'm not going to go into it, the visual metaphor created is both interesting and ironic, but the net result is that, in spite of her efforts, Davis again sends her a clear signal of rejection. And it is at this point that the truth finally dawns upon her and she states, rhetorically, "I'm never going to be good enough for you, am I?"

Witherspoon finally understands that no amount of effort on her part will change his mind and cause him to accept her. She sees now that the problem is not with her at all. It is with him and his unwillingness to accept her and receive her and, beyond that, with the whole basis of his ever accepting her in the first place.

Something of that sort of dynamic is found in the verses before us this morning where Jesus finds himself, among other things, in the midst of a people for whom it seems no amount of proof or evidence will be sufficient for them to change their minds about him. And the problem, in the end, is not with Jesus or with what he has or has not done. It is with them and their whole approach to him.

As in the movie just cited, their response to Jesus seems to be very much tied to what he can *do* for them, or *potentially* do for them. As long as he provides the earthly, material things they have their hearts set on, they are with him, but when he stops catering to those temporal desires, or offers something more substantial, many of them will move on, as we will see soon enough.....

Now, in case you have not been with us for this series, let me try and very quickly bring you up to speed. The Apostle John has written this Gospel with evangelistic purposes in mind - i.e., he wants this Gospel to promote belief in the Lord Jesus Christ - among people in general, to be sure, but in particular among the many people of Jewish descent scattered around the then known world, including the city of Ephesus from which he was most likely writing.

Part of getting his Jewish readers to accept Jesus involved getting them to see how Jesus' life and ministry stood in *complete continuity* with all that God had done through people like Abraham and Moses and David and the prophets. At the same time, it involved John showing how Jesus was the *culmination and expansion and fulfillment* of what God was doing through all these forefathers that they so revered - *BUT not in the way that they had been taught to understand or expect*. In other words, John had to show his readers how their mis-reading of the Scriptures was now getting in the way of their seeing and accepting Jesus for who he really was.

And, of course, the difficulty that faced John in this area was the same one that Jesus faced in his own life, and was the reason why there was so much opposition to him, particularly among the religious authorities in his own day.

In chapter 6, as many of you will know, we have seen the outworking of some of these dynamics. We have seen Jesus perform the miracle of the feeding of the multitude, drawing deliberate connections between his own ministry and that of Moses. And we seen further parallels in Jesus' delivering his people from trouble ON the waters, just as God delivered his people from trouble THROUGH the waters in Moses' day.

Well, in the verses before us this morning, we come back to that initial parallel - between Jesus feeding of the multitude and God's provision of manna through Moses - and hopefully will see the some of the deeper significance that attaches to what Jesus did. Before we look more closely at that dynamic and at the verses before us this morning, let's pray together.....

(Pray and read Jn 6:25-36)

As the passage begins, Jesus and his disciples are now at Capernaum, where they have been before. How long they have been here we don't know for sure, but it can't have been long as the crowds, many of whom were with them on the other side of the Sea of Galilee, have now caught up with them.

In their initial approach to Jesus the crowd want to know when he arrived there which was also possibly a question about *how* he got there since, as we saw in the previous passage, there was both mystery and miracle involved in that whole event. And there may well have been a *note* of exasperation in their voices. Perhaps some of them are feeling a little put out by the fact that Jesus just sort of disappeared without letting them know where he was going or what he was doing, as if he was somehow answerable to them - which he wasn't.

Whatever the case, the fact is, Jesus *ignores* their question, which, in itself, is worth noting, if only briefly. And this is not the only time that Jesus will do such a thing. When you look at Jesus' life as a whole you see that he clearly did not feel obligated to answer every question he was asked. And there seem to have been various reasons for that. Sometimes people were asking the wrong question. Sometimes they were asking an irrelevant or pointless question. Sometimes they were asking a false question - either because it was a trick question, or a very selfish question, or a *pretend* question that's not *really* a question but an accusation *disguised* as a question.

Anyway, the point is that not every question deserves an answer. Now this, I know, flies in the face of the popular belief that "there is no such thing as a stupid question" - which is, unfortunately, a stupid statement to make and - perhaps - one that all of us have been guilty of making at one time or another. I know I certainly have.

But the fact is, there are questions that ARE stupid. Hang around with me long enough and you will hear a truckload of them. The person who walks into McDonald's and asks if they serve hamburgers is not really at the top of his game, is he? Surely you can't put that sort of question in the same category as questions about the meaning of life or the cure for cancer.

Now, of course, what people are trying to accomplish with statements like, "there is no such thing as a stupid question" is to encourage people to ask the questions they have and to not be intimidated by the possibility of saying silly things. But surely a better way to encourage people to ask their questions is not by perpetrating the notion that there is no such thing as a stupid question - which is painfully untrue - but by helping people to understand why they need not be held captive to the idolatry of other people or be driven and defined by the fear of what other people will think.

I digress. But the point is that Jesus doesn't answer every question because not every question is worth answering. And where that comes home to you and me is to recognize that the Jesus that *we* come to, and the Jesus of whom we ask *our* questions is the *same* Jesus that you see here. And just as people back in the day would sometimes ask un-helpful or mis-guided questions, so too might we find ourselves asking the same sorts of things, from time to time.

Surely we are as prone to missing the point as some of his own followers. But here's the thing I want you to see: Jesus, while sometimes ignoring the *question*, never ignores the *questionER*. Sometimes he answers the question you *are* asking. And sometimes he answers the question you *should* be asking, but aren't, for whatever reason. Sometimes he responds to the things you see as relevant - because, in fact, they *are* relevant. And sometimes he responds to other things that are more relevant - *whether you see it that way or not*.

But on those occasions when God chooses not to deal with the particular question we are asking, it isn't because he is being hard or cold or harsh. It's because he can see better than we *think* we can see, and he knows better than we *think* we know, and that shapes the *way* he responds to us, and the *timing* of his response and the *substance* of his response. God may not always respond to our questions. And if that is the case, you can rest assured that there is a good reason for it. *But even when he doesn't respond to our question, He always responds to US*.

Which is precisely what Jesus does here. These people who are following him around have asked questions about his itinerary and travel details, and Jesus responds by going right past *that* issue. And instead of responding to *their* questions about *his movements*, he starts talking to *them* about *their movements* and especially *the motivations* behind them.

The question that needs to be answered here is not *when Jesus got to Capernaum* but *why they have followed him there*. And of course Jesus already knows why they are there. They have tracked him down not because of the signs he has performed - in other words, not because of what the signs say about who he is - but because their stomachs were filled and they were looking for more of the same. In other words, their response to him seemed to be confined entirely within the realm of what he could do for them.

And how easy it is to commit the same error. It's all too easy to respond to Jesus because of what he *offers* or because of what we are hoping that *he can and might do for us*. Now, to be sure, what Jesus does and has done and promises to do are great things, wonderful things. But at the end of the day, if that is the sum and substance of our response to him, then it is not really about *him*, is it? It's really more about *us* and about *our* getting what we think *we* need. We love him because he *delivers*.

I remember when I was younger and living in Slidell that my father decided that he wanted to have a pool put in the backyard which, of course, we were all very excited about. And it was when we were still pretty new to this particular neighborhood that we had just moved to and, up to that point at least, not many of our neighbors had bothered to introduce themselves to us.

And there was one neighbor in a house right behind ours, whom we would see from time to time, but who had, to that stage at least, remained fairly aloof. However, when he worked out that we were getting a pool put in, all of the sudden there were waves and shouted greetings and little "drop in" visits that started to happen. And of course even as a 10 year old boy I could see what was going on and it wasn't very pleasant. It was clear to anybody watching that their friendship was based upon what they were thinking they could get out of the whole thing.

And of course it wasn't a very pleasant experience for my parents because it only heightened the sense of rejection that they had already felt from these particular people. And that was over something as trivial as a swimming pool. One can only imagine what it must have felt like for Jesus when so many people followed him around and gave him all this attention - but only because of what they were hoping to get out of him, only because of some sort of anticipated "payoff" or "fringe benefit".

And, you see, the problem with the crowd here is not that they expect too much from Jesus. *It's that they expect too little from him.* They have set their sights far too low. The items on their wish list are this-worldly and are, by comparison, a shadow, *a mere shadow*, of what Jesus has come to give.

That is the sad truth of so much of what you hear from so many of the more popular TV and radio preachers these days. And please hear me, I'm not paying out on these people because they are an easy target but because what they are doing is so directly relevant to what is going on in this passage.

I couldn't sleep the other night and was flipping through the channels and - Lisa, as God is my witness, I was NOT looking for one of these programs. (I have to say that because she gets upset with me when I watch TV preachers). But, in my own defense can I just say that, at certain times of the night/morning, they're pretty much everywhere you turn. And so I happened to land on one of the channels when the preacher was mid-sentence, and he was talking about his Mercedes Benz. Now, again, please hear me, I'm not "down" on quality cars, that's not the point I'm trying to make.

But what this guy was saying was that nice cars and nice homes and large bank accounts were the sorts of things that every believer ought to expect and anticipate and pray for and, dare I say it, "claim" as rightfully theirs - as their "birthright" because of their relationship with Christ. And, as always happens - which is why Lisa doesn't allow me to watch these programs - I was immediately angered by what I was hearing. But then my anger turned to frustration. And my frustration turned to a deep and profound *sadness*.

Do you want to know *why* I was sad?

There were actually a number of reasons, but here's the one that nailed me the other night: I was sad because as the camera panned across the congregation, and I saw the looks on their faces, and listened to their hoops and hollers and "amens", it broke my heart to think that here are these poor, misguided people, who *actually believe* that the PINNACLE, the EPITOME, that the BEST that Jesus has to offer them is a car, or a house, or a large bank account. They actually believe that those sorts of THINGS are the *best that God can do*, that they are the *definitive picture of the blessings* that Jesus has for his people.

But the sad reality is that, when seen from an eternal perspective, the things of this world will not even register on the lowest reaches of any sort of scale of blessing that one might imagine. To think that somewhere in eternity there might be a person looking back on what Jesus has done, living in the light and glory of God's presence, who, when asked to comment on the goodness and kindness of God toward them in this life - to think that someone responding to a question like that would start talking about cars and houses and bank accounts is so crass and pathetic that it borders on the blasphemous.

Let me tell you something, **NOBODY IS GOING TO THINK THAT WAY IN HEAVEN.** When people in heaven start recounting how Jesus filled them so that they never hungered again, and gave them drink so that they would never thirst again - when people in heaven start recounting those things, they won't be talking about cars and houses and bank accounts. They will be talking about the matchless beauty and wonder of God the Father, and God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. They will be talking about His wisdom and His power and His amazing love, and His awesome holiness, and His un-merited kindness, and His boundless mercy and His relentless forgiveness. They will be talking about his stunning self-sacrifice on the cross, about his inexplicable generosity in bringing us into his own family, about his friendship in spite of our being his enemies, about his provision and presence in the midst of struggle and hardship, and about the transforming power of His grace. That is what they will be talking about. Not cars. Not bread. And not fish.

And that's what made me so sad the other night: the knowledge that there are so many people who have been led to believe that such ultimately trivial things are the best that God has to offer.

But Jesus said to them, "Do not labor for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you." Jesus urged these ones who had set their sights so terribly low, to look past mere temporal and material blessing to something much more substantial and lasting.

Well, up to this point the crowds' understanding and response to Jesus has fallen well short of the mark. And that tradition continues in verse 28 as they respond to this challenge that Jesus gives them to set their sights higher than they have. And the odd and discouraging thing is that you would have *thought* that when a guy says to you "do not labor for the food that perishes but for *the food that endures to eternal life*" – you would have thought that on the heels of a statement such as that the thing they would be asking about is this food that endures to eternal life. What is that all about? What is Jesus talking about there?

But instead, they pick up on the fact that Jesus said "do not **LABOR** for.....certain things" and have made their question about that - a question about law-keeping. In other words, it would seem that, in spite of what Jesus *said*, what they *heard* him say was that the reason they had not received this food that endures to eternal life is because they were not *working* or *laboring* in the right way. They were not doing the right *things* and so were not getting the right *results*. So they ask, "What must we **DO**, to be **DOING THE WORKS OF GOD?**"

And surely this response saddened Jesus, but he, nevertheless, pushes on, still trying to get them off this wavelength, still trying to get them to see past the material and physical to things more spiritual and substantial. And so, in spite of the fact that they are now heading down yet another rabbit trail, Jesus gets out of ahead of them in order to try and bring them back such that, in response to their question about WORKS, he says, “This is the work of God, *that you believe in him whom he has sent.*” In response to their question about works, Jesus starts talking about *faith*. To put it another way, in response to their question about what it is that they must DO, Jesus starts talking to them about what they must *believe* which, ultimately, is not a work that they can claim at all but is entirely the work of God, which we will see very clearly in the verses ahead (6:36, 6:44 and 6:65) over the next couple of weeks.

Well, in response to what Jesus says about believing in the one whom God had sent - which they clearly took as Jesus’ referring to himself - the people then ask Jesus for some sort of proof, some sort of demonstration of power that would *justify* their having faith in him and trusting in him. And so they say, “...what sign do you do, that we may see and believe you? What works do you perform?...” And then they cite an example of the sort of thing they are thinking about, “Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat’”.

Now, on the surface, the request they make - and in particular the example that they provide of the sort of “sign” they are looking for - seem a little ridiculous since the thing that they refer to - their forefather receiving a miraculous feeding - was the very thing that Jesus had done for them, on the other side of the Sea of Galilee. Remember, this is largely the same crowd that was present at the previous miracle.

But given their prior statements and their materialistic motivations - it is likely that the response they give here is one of two things, or possibly both. One the one hand, it is likely that their statements here are a bare-faced attempt at trying to manipulate Jesus into repeating the previous miracle - In short, they are looking for another free meal out of this whole thing and are still thinking only with their stomachs.

Alternatively and/or additionally, it is possible to give them a little more credit than that and suggest that perhaps they were bringing up the fact of what God did through Moses in the wilderness for another reason. Perhaps what they were suggesting was that the thing that Jesus did has been done *before* and that if they expect to believe that he has something *better* to offer - i.e., food that endures to eternal life - as he has just said - then he is going to have to do a different sort of a miracle. So far, Jesus feeding of the crowds was a one-time, one-meal gig - and in that respect very much like what happened with Moses.

Nevertheless - Jesus takes a different tack - again - He still presses on, partly because he knows that no amount of miracles or “proof” will, in itself, fully convince the human heart - only God can do that - and because he knows that the crowd is still only thinking in shallow, materialistic, this-worldly terms.

And so, rather than give them what they are asking, he points out two things to them: Firstly, he points out that the bread that God gave them through Moses was not, strictly speaking, the bread from heaven - at least it is not the thing that Jesus is referring to when he promises to give them food to endure. The bread their forefathers received was a real bread-like substance - but it was nothing more than that. There was nothing magical or inherently supernatural about it.

By contrast, the “bread from heaven” - the true bread, the bread that Jesus is talking about that endures to eternal life - THAT bread was not and could not have been given by Moses but only by the Father himself and is, in fact, what God has done and is doing through himself [Jesus]. Jesus is the “true bread” from heaven - i.e., HE is the heavenly provision of God that will fulfill his people as nothing on earth will and who will bring eternal life to all who “feed” on him, to all who come to him and look to him and believe in him.

And so it is throughout this story, and continues to be among people in our own day. People are looking at Jesus on one plane only, and He wants them to see him on an entirely different one. He wants them to look *past* the miracles to *the miracle giver* - he wants them to stop fixating on the miracles themselves and, instead, look at the thing that the miracles were designed to point them to - himself.

That was the challenge that Jesus faced in his own day and in his own ministry. It is the challenge that the apostle John faced and which guided him in the writing of this Gospel, and it is the challenge that we face in the church today as we carry on the Gospel mission of taking the story of *this* Jesus, and get people to look at his life - yes - and to see the things that he said and did - yes - but then to get them to look *past* those things themselves to see the deeper reality and significance to which they point.

In short, we want them to see more than the Jesus who DOES. We want them to see the Jesus who IS. We want them to see that he is not just the God of the gaps. He is the Shepherd looking for the lost sheep, the Forgiver of the Guilty, the Restorer of the Fallen. He is God Almighty, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, the Creator of all things.

And we do people no favors when the Jesus we present to them is something less than that. What we offer is shallow and temporary if it stops with what Jesus can do and what he can provide during this bus stop that we call “life on earth”. We do them no favors if that is what we focus on and are all about what he *can and might do* rather than being about *who he is* and *what he has already accomplished* and *why he needed to do it in the first place*. We do the Gospel a great dis-service if we communicate the idea that Jesus came to give us a better quality of life when, in fact, he came to give us life - PERIOD. He came to give us HIMSELF.

Jesus loves us way too much to allow us to set the categories. He loves us too much to allow US to define what our deepest needs are. He loves us too much to let us settle for the cabbage water and dry bread that we call a “feast” - knowing that what he offers is so much more mind-blowingly amazing than we would dare imagine

(Read 6:34-35)