

As Much as They Wanted . . . And More

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Today's Gospel lesson is John 6:1-21. This is the first of a series of five stories from John chapter 6. They explore one of Jesus' "I am" sayings: I am the Bread of Life. Throughout the rest of John's Gospel, Jesus speaks a number of "I am" sayings:

- "I am the light of the world"
- "I am the door"
- "I am the good shepherd"
- "I am the resurrection and the life"
- "I am the way, the truth, and the life"
- "I am the vine"

The Greek for "I am" is *ego eimi*. *Ego eimi* is what God says to Moses when Moses asks "Who shall I say sent me?" In the Greek translations of the Old Testament, which circulated in Jesus' time, God says, "Tell them *ego eimi* "I am" sent you.

For Jesus to speak the words *ego eimi* would have made Jesus' hearers gasp when they heard it. *Gasp!* "Did he just call himself by the name of God?" So listen now for the word of God to us.

Gospel Lesson: John 6:1-21

Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias. A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples.

Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. When [Jesus] looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, [he] said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?" He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. Philip answered him, "Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little." One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?"

Jesus said, "Make the people sit down." Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all. Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, "Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost." So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets. When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, "This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world."

When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself. When evening came, his disciples went down to the sea, got into a boat, and started across the sea to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them. The sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing. When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and they were terrified. But he said to them, "Ego eimi—It is I—do not be afraid." Then they wanted to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the land toward which they were going.

Last Saturday was that one Saturday that I have each month when I do not have a sermon to write. Some weeks before, when I came home from work, Chris led me to the calendar on our kitchen wall—a broad grin on his face—and he said, “Come look what I did!” And he pointed to July 21, where he had written “Beach day.”

Our original plan was to leave the house at 7:00 am, but Chris let me sleep in until nearly 8:00. We throw on beach clothes, brew coffee, and were on Topsail Beach by 10:30. The beach was full of keyhole limpets and beautiful, translucent stones. Though our shell bags look and feel full, they contain nothing that most folks would call treasure. We don’t have the same standards as most people when we go shelling. We’re not looking for large, whole, dramatic shells—though we feel blessed when we find them! We’re looking for the things that we find interesting: a particularly deep slipper shell, a streak of purple on a mostly yellow clam, an entirely white oyster shell, a widely variegated calico, the soft lavender angel wings of an empty coquina clam.

We walk the beach heads down and mostly silent until 1:00 then we turn to go to lunch and are surprised to see that we’ve gone no more than half a mile or so up the shore. We have lunch, walk through a couple of shops, and go back to the beach until 4:00. Chris drives partway while I meditate, then we switch, and I drive home while he naps. We stop at the grocery store for Ben and Jerry’s: Pistachio for him, Urban Bourbon for me. We are asleep by 9:30. A perfect day!

Close your eyes. Think back to the last time you had what you would call a perfect day. One of those days that feels expansive, spacious, and gracious. A day when time floats and drifts. One of those days when events or people or situations flow together perfectly. A day when you say to yourself or to a partner, “I wish this day could go on forever.” Think about that day and that feeling for a few moments. Let your consciousness sink into that feeling and rest in the spaciousness of that moment.

[Allow time for three deep breaths.]

I wonder what the day was like for the 5000 gathered on that hilltop beside the Sea of Galilee? I imagine one of them reclining on an elbow in the grass. From her hilltop perch, she can see the sun glinting on the rippled surface of the lake. The sunshine making her a little sleepy perhaps despite her hunger. Someone hands her half a round of brown barley bread. She breaks it and hands her neighbor half a round of brown barley bread. A whole grilled tilapia, today they call it St. Peter’s fish, comes her way. She breaks it and passes on a whole grilled tilapia. And so the afternoon winds on with bread and fish being passed through the crowd until everyone has had enough. And the crowd sits peacefully on the grass like so many pastured lambs while the disciples gather enough baskets to feed all the tribes of Israel.

Now close your eyes and imagine yourself on that hillside overlooking the Sea of Galilee. Your stomach is full of brown barley bread and grilled fish, the sun sparkles on the water, a breeze from the lake sweeps up the hill. The grass is soft and cool. Perhaps you spread your arms and lie back in it to gaze up at the blue sky. No one is sick. No one is suffering. And in this moment, no one is poor. Rest for a moment in the spaciousness of that feeling.

[Allow time for three deep breaths.]

For me the experience of days like that fills me with a sense of abundance, of lightness of heart, of openness of hand. It’s like that Neal Young song: “Comes a light, feeling’s lifting, lift that baby right up off the ground.” And as I see it, there are two ways we can respond to moments like that: we can live into the openness and generosity of those moments or we can become grasping and clinging.

The crowd on that hilltop witnessed one of seven signs that give hints about who Jesus is: water into wine; healing the temple officer’s son, healing the paralytic at the pool of Bethesda, multiplication of

loaves and fishes, walking on water, healing the man born blind, raising Lazarus. To the first three signs, the witnesses respond with amazement, belief, and offense—many who saw the sign at the pool of Bethesda were more offended that it occurred on a sabbath rather than grateful for the healing. To the sign of multiplying the loaves and fishes, the crowds respond by grasping and clinging to Jesus to make their present abundance a permanent arrangement. Perhaps they were prompted by the nearness of the feast of Passover: the time of year when the people of God roast a lamb and eat unleavened bread to commemorate the night that God spared the firstborn of the Hebrew boys. Perhaps they were prompted by their corporate memory of God’s miraculous provision of manna—bread from heaven—during the wilderness wanderings. Whatever the prompting, this sign brought to their minds a promise from Deuteronomy that “The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like [Moses] from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet” (Deuteronomy 18:15). And the people respond as Moses predicted: they want to make Jesus into an earthly, political king, someone with the power and authority to help them shake off the oppressive thumb of Rome and make their present ease and abundance permanent.

I think it is a very human inclination to want to hang on to moments like that. We are inclined to grasp at them, to put into place the resources—time, money, liberty, people, situations—that would allow us to hold on to that perfection and keep it forever.

But God calls us to let those moments of abundance pass through our hands lightly. To let them flow through our hands and our spirits then up and out so that we pass them to other people. What if, instead of grabbing on to Jesus to make him king, the people had remembered this verse from Deuteronomy: “Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, ‘Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land’”? Or, in their fullness, they had recalled that “the resident aliens, the orphans, and the widows in your towns, may come and eat their fill so that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work that you undertake” (Deuteronomy 14:29). Or, as they sat on that verdant, fertile hillside, they had remembered “When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, do not glean what is left; it shall be for the alien, the orphan, and the widow” (Deuteronomy 24:21).

We want to cling and grasp and guard the things that fill us with a sense of self-satisfaction and security, but God calls us to what Richard Foster calls “the freedom of simplicity.”

The spiritual discipline of simplicity . . . sets us free to receive the provision of God as a gift that is not ours to keep and can be freely shared with others.¹

One of the clearest expressions of the spirituality of simplicity comes to us in the Sermon on the Mount:

25 Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? 26 Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? 27 And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? 28 And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, 29 yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. 30 But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? 31 Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ 32 For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your

¹¹ *Celebration of Discipline*, p. 85.

heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. 33 But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. (Matthew 6:25-33)

Jesus responds to the crowd by withdrawing and going back up the mountain to be alone. His withdrawal at the end of this central sign in John's Gospel was a pivotal moment for him as well as for the crowd. As the crowd pivoted toward an anxious grasping and clinging, Jesus pivoted away from them and toward the freedom of the kingdom of God. He retreats back up the mountain for solitude. The Gospel doesn't tell us what Jesus did all alone on that mountain throughout that afternoon and into the evening. But I think he spent it in prayer and meditation. Because when he comes back down, he performs his fifth sign in a demonstration of the nature of his kingdom:

When evening came, his disciples went down to the sea, got into a boat, and started across the sea to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them. The sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing. When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and they were terrified. But he said to them, "Ego eimi—It is I—do not be afraid." Then they wanted to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the land toward which they were going.

"This sign," writes Eugene Peterson, "reveals Jesus as sovereign in creation, gladly received and welcomed as such by his disciples. And, most significantly, there is this: The narration of the sign is centered in the *ego eimi* expression in verse 20: "It's me. It's all right. Don't be afraid." This expression is the form of the divine name that Jesus used to identify himself. And John skillfully weaved it in and out of the fabric of his gospel. This sign counters . . . the wrongheaded "make him king (of Galilee)" with the assertion of his sovereignty over all creation. . . . In this miracle, Jesus did for his disciples what they could not do for themselves. And he does for us what we, for all our strenuous effort, cannot do for ourselves."²

It is all too clear that the rulers of this world are subject to influence, manipulation, corruption, and abuse of power. But the king of all creation who rules the wind and the waves, rules us with sovereign love. With the gentle and generous hand of a shepherd who makes his flock lie down in green pastures and leads them beside still waters, the king of love restores us with the gifts of bread and meat, of warm sunshine and cool grass, of lapping waves and ocean breezes, of beautiful shells and rocks and sand, of perfect days and loved ones to share them with. May we respond in open-handed generosity and the freedom of simplicity.

Now to the One who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all we can ask or imagine, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

² *Conversations: The Message with its Translator*, Eugene H. Peterson (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2007), p. 1648.