

“Seekers”
Psalm 130
John 6:35, 41-51

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Seekers. It’s a term we hear talked about in the media. It’s also a term that gets tossed around in church and religious circles. As I’ve been looking through worship materials this summer, I have found several forms of what are called “Seeker Services.” The term seems in many ways to be one that is a product of our culture. After all, we are the ones who practically originated marketing options. We have Starbucks and 40 kinds of wheat bread and who knows how many ways to fix a hamburger. And the term “seeker” at first glance seems to fit into that same mold. Many of us, we are told, like to have an array of religious and worship options. We might take a little Christianity here, a little Buddhism there and maybe throw in a little Islam for good measure. We are told by some that we need to offer an array of services – traditional, contemporary, one for the teens, etc., etc.

When people discuss what they call “seekers,” it’s as if they are talking about people who are starting with a blank slate. People with no religious assumptions or predispositions. One can come into the world and choose the God one wants to serve. It’s true that in the past half century, the North American religious scene has gone through great upheaval. A young twenties girl asked me recently how she should find a church. She said her mother had been Catholic, her Dad Protestant, and she just didn’t know which door to walk into. She wanted to be part of a church but she didn’t know where to start. It can be very difficult to find one’s place in the midst of what seems to be such a chaos of options. Often, I think, seekers become so-called seekers because they simply don’t know where to start.

Today, however, I have a somewhat different take on all this. When we think of seekers from the perspective of ones who have been part of religious congregations for many years, we tend to think of them – even if it is unconscious – as outsiders. We are part of faith traditions and they are somehow trying to find their way into those traditions. We are ones who feel that we belong. They are ones who want so badly to belong, but just don’t know how to go about it. But this is an artificial separation. There is no inside and outside. As many of us know, the religious and theological diversity sitting right here today is nothing short of miraculous. And, at the same time, at the very core of our Christian faith is a necessity to seek. I welcome us all today, seekers and seekers alike.

“I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I hope; my soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning, more than those who watch for the morning.” So goes the Psalm we heard today. For the ancients, of course, this waiting for the morning could take on a terror that we might not be able to fathom today. After all, they didn’t have our scientific confidence that it was the earth and not the sun that was moving. But I’m guessing that most of us have known the deep dark of the night. Maybe it’s been on a camping trip when the campfire has long ago gone out and everyone else is asleep. Or maybe it’s a bout of insomnia or a despair that only finds its way into our consciousness when all else is quiet. There is an alertness that is there at 2 or 3am that simply isn’t possible during the day, when we are caught in the darkness of

all those familiar daytime noises. We hear our breathing. We hear the silence. We stand still as a deer in a forest, all senses acute.

But what about the second text we heard today? In the first of those famous “I am” passages in the gospel of John, Jesus says, “I am the bread of life.” He goes on to say, “No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me.” This text, like most texts, can be interpreted in a variety of ways. But I have always found myself a bit daunted by it. It seems so emphatic, somehow, so black and white. And it is, of course, Jesus speaking. And that may be part of the difficulty. Many of us, I think, may be more comfortable with God than with Jesus. A number of you I have spoken with have expressed this feeling. God seems more universal somehow. More all-encompassing. Jesus is so particular, and yes, can seem to express to us an exclusiveness that can feel like clothes that are too tight.

Jesus is hard and always has been. But the problem for us, here, today, is not so much this difficulty. The issue today is that we can feel left out by the struggle. We try to feel our way into this text. And we sense another feeling sidling up. What if God doesn’t intend for us to be part of the inner circle? “No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me.” What if we are not one of the ones who has been drawn by God? Maybe we’re just not destined to “get it.” And all this is of course not helped by the religious conversion mentality that seems so pervasive these days. Many seem to imply that in the arena of faith, you either get it or you don’t. And if you don’t, you are destined to be one of the ones always looking longingly through the windows at the warmth within. You might be able to watch for the morning but the morning will never come.

Have you ever heard someone who has picked up the violin for the first time? If you haven’t, MaryAnn or Ruth or Valerie could certainly describe the sound to you. As could my parents. I used to practice the violin right in the middle of the dining room. There couldn’t have been any more central location in our house. Even the cat couldn’t stand it. He would come and sit on the table – never mind those cat manners – and begin howling at the top of his lungs as soon as I drew my bow across the strings. Even I, the student, used to get headaches. Sometimes I used to rest for a few minutes and stare at my violin. It’s really only a box of wood with four strings. What crazy person would think it worthwhile to put fingers down in certain places on those strings and think that music might emerge? Never mind having to spend valuable time practicing each day in order to make it happen.

I am struck that at the beginning of Chapter 6 of the gospel of John, the chapter in which today’s “I am the bread of life” text appears, we hear the story of the feeding of the multitudes, the only Biblical story that appears in all four gospels. In this version, it is a boy who has some supplies. He has five barley loaves and two fish. And these are, miraculously, more than sufficient to feed the crowd up on the mountain. Not only that, but there are the leftovers. Jesus tells his disciples, “Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost.” The miracle here that we often hear first off is that so many were fed with so little. But there are other miracles here as well. Jesus worked with what he had. He didn’t import loaves and fish. And it was not an expected responsible adult who carried supplies with her just in case. Rather it was a boy who just happened to have them. Finally, when the meal is over, Jesus is very careful not to allow anything to be lost.

Jesus is the bread of life. But we don't begin with the whole loaf. We can't possibly digest a whole loaf. Rather we eat a slice here, a few crumbs there, and the nourishment of the loaf begins to be our life. The story of the loaves and the fish shows us the way to the text we heard today. It almost gives us a path. A path that might go something like this: Work with what you have. Listen to the unexpected. Make sure nothing gets lost. It is the path of seekers starting in all sorts of different places. It is the path of attention to our lives, all of which are full of the unexpected. It is the path of valuing and keeping even those things that might not seem to have any use at the time. It is the path of Christians all over the world, and is at the very core of our faith.

As today's prayer of invocation, I used a poem by Joy Mead, one of the Iona community poets. I'd like us to hear it again in light of the scriptures we have explored together:

**Spirit of Lightness and Life,
Let us be with all makers and dreamers:
All who make bread
And long to share it;
All who make music
And long to dance;
All who make words
And long for poetry;
All who are born in flesh
And long to be human;
All who make love
And trust in their longing for life.**

There are spaces in this poem. There is a space between the making of the bread and its sharing, between the music and the dancing, between the words and the poetry. God is in those spaces. God is the transformation of scratchy violin exercises into Bach sonatas. God is in the putting together of two words such that we have a poem. But we do not start with the dancing, the poetry, the being human. We start with putting one foot ahead of another. We start with a fragment of words that rings true for us. We start with being born in the flesh, being born into particular lives, and maybe we will become human.

Jesus says, "I am the bread of life." He calls us to Him.