

Food for Nomads
John 6:1-15
October 4, 2020

We often think that it was easier in earlier centuries to be Christian. Some of this comes from our habit of romanticizing the past. It's true that folks who lived prior to the scientific revolution found it unquestionably easier to accept the Christian interpretation of life, because that was the prevailing view. But even for those so-called innocents who inhabited a pre-enlightenment society it was still a big challenge to be open to the spiritual dimension and the Gospel. They were much more likely to be guilty of superstition and idol worship than committed to the Christian faith and to Christ. And even for those who actually witnessed the miracles of Jesus it remained very difficult to move them from their traditional beliefs to accept Jesus as Messiah. We will find this to be the case as we explore this chapter six of John over the next few weeks.

Diana Butler Bass opens her book, ***Christianity after Religion***, with the observation that the village she grew up in has vanished. Her birthplace has not physically been destroyed, but it has been transformed into something entirely different from the one she knew as a young girl growing up. In the early 60's all the families in her village believed the same things about God, morality, and what constituted the good life, whether parents, pastors, teachers, librarians, politicians, businessmen or police officers: they all held to a common view of the world. They were Christians by virtue of being born into North America. They mostly shared a worldview based on order, reason and objective truth. To be Christian was to be a good citizen.

Like Diana this is the world I, and also many of you, grew up in. My family church has long been converted into the local council offices. It's such an eerie feeling for me to walk into that building now. Over top of the new office ceiling I can still see the brass plaque where my Uncle Claude's name is listed with those killed in the war. It hangs just below the pipes of the organ at the front of the nave. And to the right I can still see the former Kirk Session room paneled in oak. High to my right, looking up from the nave, is the north balcony where once

the faithful citizens gathered each Sunday morning. The place was filled in 1950. How the world, even in my short lifetime, has been transformed. The bells no longer call the flock to worship at 11 o'clock; instead, the citizens heed the call of other signals that promise a very different world of meaning. In this new world the spiritual has been relegated to a far corner of society where its voice is rendered mute, like the bells of yesterday.

An example of our current confusion appeared in Tuesday's ***Spectator*** with an article titled, "Looking for Answers". The author claims that more people are turning to astrology for answers to life's big questions, especially during this pandemic: life's meaning, financial and emotional insecurity, purpose, relationships, etc. Samantha's astrology classes in Toronto are booked solid. She also runs a crystals store which is running short of items. She says that the "transit system of planets and stars have shaped her life significantly." For many of us this may sound really weird, but outside organized religion this is one of the sources people seek out. Where else do they get their answers? What this tells me is that people today are hungry for answers amid a confusing, bewildering world.

I am reading a book by Brian McLaren, ***The Great Spiritual Migration***. He argues that the Christian story from Genesis to Revelation is one of migration, of movement. We have seen this in our reflections on the Exodus story of Israel's journey through the wilderness. God's people are on the move. We see it in Jesus who is always on the move. Christians are even told that they are pilgrims in a strange land. But, as Brian argues in the book, what the church and Christians today need most of all, is a theological migration that will unleash Christianity's potential for healing and transformation. He argues that we need to migrate from organized religion to a religion organized for the common good. We need, in essence, to move from a system of beliefs to a Way of Life, a way of love.

The reality for us Christians today is that nomadic spirituality ought to be the new normal. To be Christian, to be open to the transforming work of the Spirit of Jesus, is to live in gentle tension with modern society's interpretation of life. Abraham, our father in the faith, also confessed himself to be a nomad, a wanderer who sought a different homeland from the one advertised by his peers. Hebrews chapter 11

reminds us that all of our family of faith confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth. Hebrews says:

They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore, God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them. (Hebrews 11:13ff).

So, to be Christian nomads in contemporary society is who we ought to be as communities of faith if we want to be spiritual, healthy congregations. We who have chosen to follow Jesus on this faith journey, and who feel, at times at least, to be aliens and strangers in a strange land, have made this our life choice. Unlike those in the lost villages of our youth, like Diana's, Christians today are people who make a choice to follow Jesus. We didn't accept the former Christian worldview which framed it in terms of citizenship. We are Christians by personal choice.

Having left the village of my youth I found myself in this exciting new land of Canada. What I remember most about those early days as a teenager is my sense of confusion. My sense of life was one in which life was like the back of a hand-woven carpet, like the one Gail and I brought back from Turkey, one of incoherent patterns, loose threads, and crooked lines on the back. Turn it over and it is beautiful, but turning life over and inside out, using all the resources of modern life, didn't seem to lessen the confusion. I believe the reason is simple. We are made in God's image and as humans were wired for the spiritual and for a God relationship. Cut us off from that centre, pave over the religious/spiritual/mystical dimension with thick layers of materialism, relegate the truth of Scripture to a few quotes from Shakespeare, and feeling centered remains elusive.

John is particularly interested for us to know the setting of this miracle of the loaves and fishes. Jesus, like Moses before him, goes up the hillside with his disciples. How are they to feed such a multitude, he asks Philip. Sit them down on the green grassy valley floor, he tells his disciples. These details conjure up for the reader the days of

Moses, the prophet of God who brought them out of Egypt. Jesus, John is telling his readers, is the great prophet that Moses promised God would raise up to lead his people to a new freedom.

Nomadic Christians today may have left their villages where life was ordered and secure but they have formed new villages. These new communities are made up of pilgrims who have joined in a journey to rediscover Christianity and how it relates to their post-Christian world. These are not the safe, somewhat sanitized faith communities that some of us were born into. These new Christians, like us, have ventured out into the unknown and have been willing to take the risk of faith and embrace change. Instead of straight lines, authoritative views on right and wrong and doctrinal correctness, rational acceptance of literalism, pilgrim communities of faith today are not so dogmatic and certain. What we do have in common with our pre-industrial brothers and sisters is that our sustenance is found in the Bible, in prayer and hospitality, and in worship, communion and service. Our roots are sent down into the damp, earthy soil of the living tradition, the grand narrative of Abraham's family and God's plan for the restoration of the universe. These are the modern nomads whose spiritual food is as essential as daily bread, as it has always been.

The five thousand who feast on the abundance of bread and fish that day were physically renewed. Jesus had multiplied the bread and fish to feed more than five thousand bellies. But before he did so he gave thanks before he distributed the food. John is careful here to tell us that this action is similar to the Eucharist when bread and wine are distributed to feed the Christian spirit and renew our sense of God's presence in our hearts and lives. The pieces left over remind us of the broken bread symbolizing Christ's broken body. Spiritual nomads need this food, this presence of Christ in their lives. Without this they would find the journey impossible. There are just too many obstacles in the path of modern life to living out this faith. Society no longer supports such villages; indeed, they find them curious, old fashioned perhaps, and certainly a hindrance to achieving the good life promised by the modern dream. So, if you are a spiritual nomad this morning you know just how important this food is for your journey.

Amen