

Food for Nomads
John 6: 22-35
October 11, 2020

We spoke last week about what it means to be a spiritual nomad; we discovered that Christians are people who have embarked on a faith journey with their Lord. Like Abraham's spiritual family, like Jesus, we, like them, are people on the move. Not only are we people of faith who seek a different homeland from the one promoted by secular society, but we are people who long to bring others along with us. And this step is personal so that stepping into a faith community is one that is no longer determined by family, tribe, church background, or even social custom. We do so because this journey is not isolated from others. It is one that engages with others in community and who all live in tension with the political/entertainment/materialist culture. Nomadic Christians are people who have been opened up to the transforming work of the Spirit of Jesus. As such they have little interest in institutional religion. They don't buy into the traditionalism that once shaped our Presbyterian churches.

Jesus little parable of the wineskins helps us here. He says: *Neither is new wine put into old wineskins. If it is, the skins burst and the wine is spilled and the skins are destroyed. But new wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved.*" (Matthew 9:17) What does this mean? I think Jesus is saying that the Jewish tradition cannot be held within his Gospel. If you try to hold it within the old container of Judaism it will burst. The new message of grace and faith can only be held in the new container of the New Testament. So, the only way the old skins (traditional religion) can survive is if they are not used to contain the new wine of the Gospel.

Spiritual nomads, as we read in Deuteronomy 26, are people who bring their tithes to God as a response of faith. When the priest takes the basket and places it on the altar the person confesses: *A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation.* Out of thanks for deliverance he brings the fruit of the land to God as an offering. Through this confession they remember who they are! Never can they forget that they were wanderers, a nomadic people that God has called to be God's people in the world.

On this thanksgiving weekend this is a powerful reminder of just how fortunate we are as Christians. We may or may not have been a success as defined by our society, but if we are spiritual nomads we are blessed. Think about it! God has been pleased to reveal his Son to us and transformed us by his grace. Like the wandering Aramean, our father in the faith, Abraham, God has brought us out of all that defined us in our past, whether family, social setting, comfort zone, our Egypt, and opened our hearts to Jesus. For me, and I hope for you, this is the greatest gift possible. My biological family had no room in it for faith. My new family of Jesus disciples have welcomed me into the journey. This is such an unspeakable gift. Yes, once I was blind, but now I see! And in response my thankful heart is opened to give back to God my service, love, and tithe.

In his book, ***The Great Spiritual Migration***, Brian McLaren notes that *movement* is at the heart of the Gospel, not correct dogma. He draws our attention to the fact that Jesus says “follow me” 87 times. How many times does he say, “worship me”? Zero! Recite a creed? Zero! And the word “disciple” appears more than 250 times in the Gospel. To be a disciple is to follow. Brian encourages us to put as much energy into the formation of Christlike disciples as we, *have put into getting people to believe certain things... (p.65ff)*

This would not be an easy shift for us! Let’s face it, discipleship is a difficult choice! Because in the zeitgeist of our time everything is thrown at us to discourage us from this path. Today we are bombarded by media, by social pressures, sometimes even by our closest friends and family, to abandon this silly quest and follow the path Jesus called calls us down.

This reminds me of the letter I received from my aunt Ruby when she learned of my Christian conversion. She pleaded with me to forget all this Christian stuff and go back to my former non-Christian life. She found my choice embarrassing and detrimental to my happiness. I would miss out on a successful career, on financial status and freedom to follow my desires. She meant well and from her perspective my choice was going to ruin my life.

When we turn today to John's story of the people seeking Jesus what do we learn? The disciples decided to cross the lake to Capernaum but Jesus remained in seclusion on the hillside. Part way across, with the wind picking up, they see him walking on the sea and coming near to them. They are terrified! But he tells them not to be afraid. They arrive at the west side of the lake.

The crowd that had witnessed the miracle of the loaves and fishes, or heard about it, are desperate to find Jesus. They realized that the disciples and Jesus have gone across the lake. So they quickly find boats and cross over. When they find him, they ask, "when did you come here?" His response is critical to the story: *You've come looking for me not because you saw God in my actions but because I fed you, filled your stomachs—and for free.*

The crowd of people pursues Jesus from wrong motives. They have witnessed his powers. But they are not seeking Jesus for his person and message. These are decidedly not nomadic folk on a spiritual quest. Jesus knew this. He tells them: *Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you (John 6:26,27)*

What food do we need for our journey? Are we hungry and thirsty for the food of angels? It's interesting that those in our world who can't measure life by the abundance of things seem so much more content. Many in sub-Sahara Africa and other corners of our globe, are in a constant state of privation. Strangely, however, many of the poor seem strangely joyful even in their poverty. But hunger is also a huge problem in Canada and the United States. People have lost their jobs during the pandemic; for many it is a harsh world where the bare necessities of bread and clean water are scarce. I see on the news that people are lining up in their cars for hours to get a box of food to feed their hungry families. Jesus fed them bread and fish but reminds them that this is not enough to feed our inner souls. We need the true bread!

It seems like a gigantic contradiction, but it remains true: while our institutional church shrivels and dies amid a society of plenty, the African church is experiencing phenomenal growth. I suppose that is why Jesus reminds us, *how hard it is for a rich person to enter the*

kingdom of God. Why? Because we who are rich in goods don't have spiritual food top of our menu.

They come back to Jesus with the challenge; prove to us that you are the one we should follow. After all Moses gave their ancestors manna in the wilderness. Show us what you can do for us, they say. The point is, Jesus responds, is that God, not Moses, gave your ancestors the manna, and is now offering you the real bread from heaven-me! It is the food that endures for eternal life. This is where spiritual nomads of the 21st century, like all nomads of every generation before them, seek their sustenance.

On this thanksgiving Sunday let us rejoice in God's bounty and love. Jesus reminds us in this story that he is the bread of God come down from heaven. If we accept this spiritual food, he says, we will never again be hungry or thirsty. Has that been true for you? Does Christ's spirit within you satisfy your deepest longing? Has his life transformed your life? Has it opened us up to our neighbour? Has it propelled us forward to seek that homeland promised? Has it enabled us to leave behind the settled traditions that often imprisoned us and freed us to be open to a new future for ourselves and our church?

Let me close with these words from Paul: *Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus... (Philippians 4:5ff)*

Amen