

## FAILURE OF IMAGINATION

7/25/21

### ACC SERMON

JOHN 6:1-21

When Paulo asked me to do a sermon on July 25th as a lay preacher I said “yes”, how can I say no to Paulo? I marvel at how ministers write and deliver sermons week after week.

No sooner had I got off the phone, I clicked on the internet to check the Lectionary on that day: Jesus feeding the 5 thousand and Jesus walking on water.

Oh boy, haven't I heard this text many times before? Well, as always, on the surface, a biblical passage seems straight forward, but frequently something jumps out that you hadn't notice before. The gospel has the power to surprise.

I have been struck by how frequently the people didn't comprehend what Jesus was trying to get across to them. Then and now. What is Jesus really trying to say or show here in John's gospel?

This is the only miracle that is mentioned in all four gospels, I hear that they are referred to as the “bread” gospels. A slip of the tongue and it would be the “breaded gospels.”

There are two stories here, Jesus feeding the five thousand and Jesus walking on water. For brevity, I am honing in to the first story— Feeding the five thousand.

Today's text again illustrates the crowd did not understand that this bread came from God through Jesus. Jesus told the hungry crowd that he was the “Bread of Life, whoever comes to me will never be hungry again and who ever believes in me will never thirst and shall have eternal life.”

Imagine a lush green pasture in the desert on which five thousand hungry men plus women and children are seated, they watch Jesus give thanks for the bread. I imagine anticipation, silent obedience, and thinking “What on earth is he gong to do, how will he feed our hunger?”

My imagination fast forwards to today. A hungry crowd of five thousand gathers at NARA park for Passover observances. I can imagine that we would pull out our cell phones and call all of the local bakeries and supermarkets—Idylwilde, Roche Bros. Market Basket. Uhh, we have fvie thousand hungry people here, could we order more than enough to feed them, and by the way, do you take credit cards, do you deliver?

Impossible. God, through Jesus, produced, and provided, and delivered the bread. Jesus does not merely provide the bread from heaven, he becomes the bread of heaven. The poor and hungry crowd had never before experienced such abundance, so much that they were filled and there were leftovers.

The little boy was willing to share his lunch of five barley loaves and two fish. Jesus always seemed to choose an unlikely helper, in this case a little boy. Bread, how often bread comes up in the bible. In this case barley bread, often seen in the Old Testament. “Barley was used only by the poor, it served as horse feed.”

The small round flat loaves were shaped similarly to the small rocks found on the desert and the loaves may have had the solid heft of rocks.

Barley was difficult to harvest, it has a very hard shell. It was not well adapted for making bread. It did not bake well, and did not take to yeast. However, barley symbolized the strength of the people of Israel.

I wanted to know more about this role of bread in biblical times.

I found a book Six thousand Years of Bread, “Its Holy and Unholy History” by H.E. Jacob, written in 1944 before the end of WWII.

The book begins with the Bread of Prehistoric Man and ends with the author’s current events: Hitler’s Famine Pact. After almost 80 years, the book is still widely published.

It is a well researched and comprehensive history of bread, ‘If not the history of bread then history caused by bread.’

Bread, wow, what a legacy! It is the end result of grass seed as evidence of transformation, both personally and historically. In making bread, it goes through numerous transformations, the dough grows and develops character, it needs yeast to fulfill its character and emerges as something totally other than what it first began— the iconic staff of life. Even the arched clay oven in which bread was baked became the symbol of a mother’s womb

And then there is bread used for political purposes, take bread away and a nation falls to its knees.

The author, Mr. Jacob had a first hand account of starvation and the Nazi’s systematic plan. You see, he had been imprisoned at Buchenwald concentration camp and ultimately walked out, starved but alive.

Herbert Hoover told the author in 1943 “World peace means a piece of bread.” The former President went on to say “the first word in a war is spoken by guns, but the last word has always been spoken by bread.”

The Nazi's ruled by regulation, logic, and were absent of emotion and imagination. They killed with hunger, they used a finely tuned scientific starvation plan.

And what was withheld most? Bread. The Nazi's rationed the so-called "bread" made of potato flour, peas, and sawdust.

Today, bread in Europe is revered, Jacques Pepin, French Chef, says that his father would turn over in his grave if he ever threw out bread, thus the many uses of leftover or stale bread—French Onion Soup, French toast, croutons

In his chapter about biblical times, author Jacob goes on to describe Jesus' world:

"Jesus came into a distressed world of physical hunger. It was a world in which grain speculators withheld grain; and the emperor misused bread for political purposes by feeding only those who supported his power. "

The author goes on to write:

"Into this world, was also a spiritual hunger for soul. The Romans were genius for organizing, perfecting details, maintaining rules and regulations. These rules were not to protect people but to control people. Values were at an all time low."

Hmmm. Logical, linear, literal, and linguistic. the four 'L's' of the left brain. That's brain science!! The logical left hemisphere of the brain ruled during biblical times!! Everything was distilled down to logic, explained by linear and literal translations. This is all left brain dominance.

At this point, I switched my focus from bread to the brain.

You may be familiar with the saying: If the left side of the brain controls the right side of the body and the right side of the brain controls the left side of the body, then only left handed people are in their right minds....

The people Jesus was addressing were functioning from an emotional desert—flat, stunted, inhibited. And yet there was a spiritual hunger and Jesus was attempting to deliver that spiritual hunger.

Have you ever watched any of those old movies of biblical times? The actors portray logical, robotic, and methodical Biblical characters. The technicolor movies are shown in 50 shades of beige: their food, their clothing, and the landscape. Dr. Spock would have fit right in with the culture of that day.

On the other hand, the right side of the brain expands to comprehend the big picture, the vast landscape. It embraces ambiguity, it is curious, flexible, and able to sense emotions. Our reading today from Ephesians actually uses some right brain phrases —'I pray to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, I pray that you may have the power to comprehend.'

Dan Siegel, a psychiatrist and neuroscientist, has written a book and subsequent workbook called the Whole Brain Child. It is for parents, grandparents, anyone with a brain :-) He addresses the right and the left brain hemispheres and how we need both and how important it is to integrate both modes.

For the world that Jesus was born in to, curiosity, emotion, and imagination may have been as dry and desolate as that desert. Years of the under utilized right side of their brains withered on the vine, or shall we say withered on the brain stem. And yet there was a spiritual hunger, Jesus was trying to address this hunger.

And also, I must add, that it is nearly impossible to be creative when you are starving, starvation brings insanity. And too, even when we are depressed, our creativity is often dampened.

Of course the crowd didn't understand Jesus, they lacked imagination and what could be.

Jesus was interacting with a government and society that was so rigid and rule oriented. Their lack of imagination prevented the kind of rich life they could have by following Jesus.

Even the disciples missed some of Jesus's points. Their brains were embedded in concrete thinking. This is why I believe many of the people and the disciples didn't understand when Jesus spoke in the language of parables, in spite of his many attempts to paint a pathway to heaven.

And we know where these misunderstandings lead. Jesus had an intuition about what would happen to him, however he did not give up demonstrating God's steadfast love.

Many of the people described in the crowd of today's passage, remembered the promise of the Old Testament— that God will raise up a prophet like Moses. Instead of seeing Jesus as the embodiment of God's love and glory, single-mindedly the people saw Jesus as someone who fit into their assumptions and serve their goals, in other words, they clamored for a king who provided them free bread.

They had been fed by God's grace and mercy and they missed the point.

We miss God's point too, we often fail to see what God is doing among us.

We need both sides of our brain, we have our dominant or default sides, but we don't live at either far end of the continuum. We need our logic and language, and we need our creativity and emotional state.

What happens if there are extremes to this left/right brain continuum?

The Romans certainly demonstrated what happens on the far extreme left side of the continuum. And like the Romans, Hitler and the Nazi's dominated with their left brain leadership. There was no tolerance for creativity, imagination, or thinking outside the box. Feelings and emotions were stunted and inhibited. Questioning authority was deadly. Only rules, rules, and rigid rules.

But....

What about the right side extreme? Rather than rigidity, chaos ensues. Like a toddler, the extreme right is ruled by emotions and reactivity, a need for immediate gratification. There is no structure, not knowing what is going to happen day to day, the people are governed by fear and uncertainty. You could describe this extreme as an emotional tsunami. I believe we are familiar with this kind of leadership.

Integration of both hemispheres is where we as individuals and as nations want to be on the left/right brain continuum. Dan Siegel promotes the whole brain theory; integrating both, without extremes in either mode. That is what we call mental wellness.

We don't need to be both a mathematician and a concert pianist, rather, integration means the whole brain, the whole person, the whole body. This is where we find safety, empathy, discernment, reflection, mindful awareness, and an ability to be in the present moment. Open to the mysteries of God's vast landscape.

Aren't these the qualities of Jesus? What God wants us to be? Mindfully in the present, empathetic, able to be at peace with uncertainty, attuned to our own bodies and to our community. Centered in faith and prayer. Jesus was a "whole brain" kind of guy.

Both logic and curiosity have a seat at the table.

Jesus delivered to the crowd more than their wildest imagination could comprehend. Bread IS holy, It is, at its most wonderful, when ALL can have it. "And they were filled." the bible says. No simpler words can be written to describe wholeness.

May this be so.

