

August 12, 2018

TEXT: John 6:35, 41–51

TITLE: Visible Grace

By the Rev. Heather Schoenewolf

Physicist and author, Helen Czerski is on a mission to help make physics accessible to everyone. With the benefit of a video screen, she invites people to look at two spinning eggs—one that is boiled and one that is raw. One egg stops fully when someone gently touches the shell to stop the rotation. The other egg stops, but then resumes its spinning. So which egg was raw, she asks? The egg that kept spinning, obviously. I'll take her word for it when she says that this is due to *the law of the conservation of angular momentum*. This principle states that “if you set something spinning about a fixed axis, it will keep spinning unless you do something to stop it.”¹ She teaches that boiled egg stops at once because the whole thing is fully solid. The raw egg, however, has a liquid center that is still in motion even if the solid shell is stopped. Makes sense, right? Well, this everyday understanding is, she points out, some of the fundamental science behind the orienting mechanism on the Hubble Telescope.

Czerski makes a strong argument. By exploring how ordinary things work in our everyday lives we can more easily understand the workings of the world and of the universe. She gives some homework: push a piece of butter toast on the floor to see which side lands facing the floor. Watch what happens when a coffee spill dries up or when you put raisins in your lemonade. The ordinary is a gateway to the extraordinary. The mundane is a portal to the magnificent.

The ordinary points us toward the extraordinary in our Gospel for today too. The conversation of which we get a snapshot today takes place the day after Jesus had fed 5,000 on a hillside. We remember the story—how multitudes were fed from a young boy's five loaves of bread and two small fish, and that there was still enough left over to fill 12 whole baskets. After witnessing such an amazing miracle, the crowds that kept following Jesus. They followed him up a hillside and across a sea. They were even more intent on trying to figure Jesus out. And so they come at Jesus with a litany of questions—*How did you get to the other side of the lake with no boat? What work does God want us to do? Can you give us a sign so we can believe you?*

Jesus does not succumb to the interrogation in conventional terms. He doesn't sit down for a moderated Q & A, or pull their questions out of a jar promising to take each question in its turn. Instead, he talks about bread.

“I am the Bread of Life,” Jesus says. “Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” His words do not sit well with the crowd

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https://www.ted.com/talks/helen_czerski_fun_home_experiments_that_teach_you_physics/transcript?language=en#t-366434

who are both frustrated by his lack of clarity and confused by his claims. The crowd grumbles, we are told. And, while we chastise them for their grumbling, if we are honest with ourselves, if the shoe were on the other foot, we might find ourselves grumbling too. *Like us*, these crowds just want to know how to follow God. *Like us*, they just want to understand Jesus' teachings. *Like us*, they want to know more so they can do better. And Jesus' answer makes about as much sense as telling someone to go home and spin some eggs in order to understand why the earth spins on its axis.

The famous phrase at the heart of our text for this morning is the first "I am" statement Jesus makes in John's Gospel. He makes seven of these altogether—many of them will sound familiar to us. He says things like: I am the light of the world, I am the Good Shepherd: I am the true vine... Jesus uses the tangible illustrations of the culture of the time to point to the larger truth of who he is and what he has come to do. He uses ordinary, everyday objects to point to a larger truth about God—God's grace, God's provision, God's presence in him, and God's call.

In the face of their questions, Jesus talks about bread. He knows they understand bread—he just fed them some the day before. So he reminds them once more of the bread that filled their stomachs just hours ago. The answers to their questions about God and discipleship can be found in the bread. Just a day ago there wasn't enough food to go around, but with God's blessing, a meager offering became abundant. God nourished, sustained and satisfied those who gathered. God in Christ took care of God's people when they didn't have the resources to take care of themselves. Jesus heard their cries before they said a word, ministered to their need, strengthened them for the journey. Once more bread came from heaven when there was nothing to eat, just like manna showed up in the wilderness according to God's promise.

But Jesus' analogy shows them that there is more Truth in this exploration of bread than just the blessing of a full stomach. Jesus starts to point out that the physical reality they experienced on that hillside just a day earlier was really just a foretaste of a larger Spiritual truth. Yes, Jesus can silence growling bellies with broken bread, but he alone can satisfy hungry hearts yearning for peace, broken hearts yearning for reconciliation, lonely hearts needing true love. Yes, Jesus can save lives by putting bread into the mouths of those who gather on green grass, but his saving work is not relegated to the physical world. He saves people from sin, and even from death. Jesus redeems.

Jesus demonstrates that God's grace can be seen in the ordinary: things like bread and water, and even one another. God does not walk into our midst on a red carpet or announce the coming of God's kingdom on stadium jumbotrons. Rather, scripture reminds us that God shows up through the things that are so much a part of daily life that we almost take them for granted. Things like a loaf of bread. God shows up in things that are essential, fundamental, familiar—things we can't live without.

I think this is why Jesus came to us in the first place—so that God could speak to us in terms we'd understand to let us know that God's love is for us too. John's Gospel tells us that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. The Good News of God's grace

was embodied in flesh and blood so that we might see it alive in our midst, through someone we could follow up hillsides and with whom we could share a meal. God is with us in Jesus, in whom the fullness of God's grace became visible, communicated in a truth that could be seen and touched and experienced and lived.

Barbara Brown Taylor writes:

Why else did Jesus spend his last night on earth teaching his disciples to wash feet and share supper? With all the conceptual truths in the universe at his disposal, he did not give them something to think about together when he was gone. Instead, he gave them concrete things to do—specific ways of being together in their bodies—that would go on teaching them what they needed to know when he was no longer around to teach them himself.

After he was gone, they would still have God's Word, but that Word was going to need some new flesh...So Jesus gave them things they could get their hands on, things that would require them to get close enough to touch one another. In the case of the meal, he gave them things they could smell and taste and swallow. In the case of the feet, he gave them things to wash that were attached to real human beings, so that they could not bend over them without being drawn into one another's lives.²

"I am the bread of life" Jesus says. We remember this truth every time we gather around the Communion Table. We hold fast to the promise that Christ nourishes and strengthens us for the journey ahead, just as we look ahead to the banquet we will share in the life that is to come. But there's another truth to which we are called as we break bread together. We are reminded that the body of Christ—a physical manifestation of God's grace, a body broken on a cross, a body resurrected from the grave—is present in us. We are the body of Christ, called to work together to share the good news of God's gracious, redeeming love.

See, we too are the ordinary stuff through which God's love is revealed: men and women, young and old, doing our best to figure things out. We live our everyday lives, but can take heart that Jesus shows up here too, nourishing us for the journey then calling us to follow him. St. Teresa of Avilla says it powerfully when she reminds us that:

"Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet upon earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours."

We are called to be the everyday, ordinary stuff through which God's grace is made visible—sharing compassion to those who suffer; welcoming those who are outcast;

² Taylor, Barbara Brown. *An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith*. p 43-44.

working for justice for the oppressed. We are called to clothe the naked, feed the hungry, forgive the sinner. We are called to embody the love we profess in Christ.

“Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love,” Paul writes. This is our call—to the church gathered at ELPC, to the church that gathers at Rennerdale, to the church throughout the world. Live in love, that God’s grace might be made visible in our ordinary lives—and that we might point someone to the extraordinary love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Amen.