

Raise Your Eyes
Proper 16: John 6: 56-69
August 22, 2021
The Rev. Eyleen Farmer

Yesterday, in preparation for being here today, I had a lively phone conversation with Dan Matthews, who, I was delighted to hear, will be back in Calvary's pulpit for the Lenten Preaching Series next March. I called him because I had heard that Dan's father had known personally a famous, old-time evangelist named Billy Sunday. It turns out Robert Matthews not only knew Billy Sunday; he was Billy Sunday's personal secretary and closest friend, traveling with him on his revival campaigns all over the country for twenty years.

I became interested in Billy Sunday when I stumbled onto a quote attributed to him that really hit home for me. Here it is: "Going to church doesn't make you a Christian any more than standing in a garage makes you an automobile."

I like this quote. And had I been there to hear it in person, I would have wanted to wrangle over it. "I get your point," I would say, "but if you wanted to be a car, a garage would be a good place to start. You could look around at the parts, check under the hood of a few cars and get an idea of just what kind of car you'd like to be. Likewise, if you wanted to be a Christian, church would be the best place to go. You could see what kind of folks are there, sing the hymns and listen to the preacher a few times, and you'd have a good idea of what kind of Christian you want to be. That's how I became a Christian, Mr. Sunday. By going to church."

In this imaginary conversation, I expect he would size me up as having missed his point and reply, "Well, there's more to it than that."

There was certainly more to it for Billy Sunday. He was born in 1862 in Iowa, spent several years in an orphanage, and played baseball for the Chicago White Stockings. He was a colorful, crowd-pleasing ballplayer. Then, on a fated Sunday morning when he was 25 years old, sitting on the curb outside a saloon, he heard some missionaries singing hymns he had heard his mother sing. He started attending services at the mission, and Billy Sunday decided to become a Christian.

It would take some years, but he would eventually become the most effective evangelist of the early 20th century. His preaching was even more colorful than his ball playing. "(He) gyrated, stood on the pulpit, ran from one end of the platform to the other, and dove across the stage, pretending to slide into home plate. Sometimes he even smashed chairs to emphasize his points. His sermon notes had to be printed in large letters so that he could catch a glimpse of them as he raced by the pulpit."* My goodness. He wouldn't last long at Calvary Church.

Billy Sunday drew large crowds wherever he went. It is reported that more than a million and a half people heard him preach over the course of his fifty year career, and he is credited with the conversion of more than 300,000 souls. He came to Memphis at least once, Dan told me, and held a six week revival just a few blocks from here down on Front Street. Twenty-five thousand people came to hear Billy Sunday preach.

Today is the fifth of five Sundays in a row in which the Gospel text comes from the sixth chapter of John. This stretch of lessons is unique—there is no other single chapter in the entire Bible that gets as much press as this one. It's known as the Bread of Life Discourse, and it is the text from which much of our eucharistic theology comes. It's important. But frankly, it's also boring and hard to understand. Especially when you chop it up into five pieces.

So, a brief review. The first lesson records the feeding of the five thousand. The crowds who have been following Jesus are so amazed they want to make him their king.

In the second lesson, the crowds are still following, but this time Jesus starts to challenge them. "You came because you ate your fill of the loaves. Work for the food that endures for eternal life." By week three, the very ones who wanted to make Jesus a king are now complaining. Who is this guy, anyway? they grumble. In week four, they start arguing in the synagogue. "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" Clearly, Jesus is not making sense.

Can you see the pattern? Jesus looked with compassion on the people who followed him to that hillside in Galilee. And he fed them. He met them where they were. But he wants so much more for them, and he invites them

into a deeper story. Sadly, the crowds, as we have come to expect, don't know what he is talking about.

Which is understandable. Those crowds are made up of poor people, people who know what an empty stomach feels like. People who worry about how to feed their families. People who, no matter how hard they work, can't get ahead because the odds are stacked against them. For the crowds, bread means bread. And while a meal yesterday is all well and good, that was yesterday and now they're wondering where today's bread is coming from.

Week five. Today. It has likely dawned on them that Jesus is not going to do a loaves and fishes repeat. Instead he continues to talk about a different kind of bread—bread beyond bread if you will. But they don't want to hear it. "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?" they say. And then, a few verses later, we come to a moment of great pathos. "Because of this," John writes, "many of his disciples turned back and no longer went around with him."

We can only see how Chapter 6 hangs together by going back to the beginning. Imagine Jesus sitting with his disciples on that hillside. The crowds are coming and they are relentless. He already knows they are hungry. What is he thinking? Is he wondering what he will do? Is he saying a silent prayer? The text doesn't say, but listen to the words that follow. "When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming towards him, Jesus said to Philip, 'Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?'" The Greek word most often translated as "looked up" is more accurately translated, according to my go-to New Testament scholar friend, as "raised his eyes." And that, she suggests, conveys a vastly different emotional tone. When you look up, you just look up. But when you raise your eyes, you see as God sees. And thus you see beyond the limitations of a seemingly impossible situation. Jesus raised his eyes and a miracle unfolded.

When Jesus tells the people after the feeding that he is the bread of life, he is not giving a lesson in eucharistic theology. And when he says "believe in me," he is not establishing membership requirements for becoming a Christian. He is inviting them into a deeper, more mature life, a life of intimate connection to one he calls Father, the source of all life.

The world, as we well know, does not and will not support that invitation. Not then; not now. It will try to convince us that what we see is all there is, and it will sow seeds of hopelessness around the suffering that surrounds us on every side—the anguished tragedies in far-away places, the painful dramas in our families, the silent brokenness of our hearts. To trust that what we see is not all there is, that the impossible is possible, requires a leap of faith, I know. And it will demand a lifetime of trying and failing and trying again. To not turn back, as “many disciples” did, but to journey on, as Peter did, is the point, I think, Billy Sunday was trying to make.

Another way to put it would be to say, when we look up and see what’s there, we may very well be good, church-going Christians. But when we raise our eyes and see the promise of what is possible, we may become, unwittingly perhaps, Jesus followers.

In a few minutes the family of Grace James Gwin will present her for baptism into the Church. Her parents will promise to help her grow into the full stature of Christ. And we will promise to support her in her life in Christ. My prayer is that we will learn, albeit slowly and imperfectly, to raise our eyes so we can teach little Grace how to raise hers.

[*https://www.massmoments.org/moment-details/evangelist-billy-sunday-draws-70000-to-boston-revival.html](https://www.massmoments.org/moment-details/evangelist-billy-sunday-draws-70000-to-boston-revival.html)