

“My Jesus?”
John 6:1-21, Ephesians 3:14-21
July 29, 2018
The Rev. Dr. Mark W. Jennings

Worship wars. Do you remember that term? Maybe they are pretty much over now, but for much of the last generation the American Christian Church has been engaged in worship wars. And much of it centered around music. What kind of music should we have in church? Excellent, time tested classics? Should we have different kinds of music in church? Should we have praise bands and guitars and drum sets or should we stick with pianos and pipe organs? The most popular genre of music in America over the last 20 years has been country music, so shouldn't the church have more country music than any other kind? And aren't those hymnal things really outdated? Should we have a screen and projectors? Or maybe we can just text the words to everyone's smart phone and they can just sing as they hold up their phones. And we don't really need to gather for church do we? We can just do a podcast and so those who can't get here on a Sunday can still participate and sing along. Lots of those discussions are still happening. But in our church we are blessed to have a director of music who guides us through this quagmire and since he is of the strong belief that music has been going downhill since J.S. Bach died in 1750, you know we're keeping our pipe organ. Actually one of the often overlooked issues in the the so-called worship wars has not so much to do with the style of the music that a church uses, but the content of that music. And this is not just a problem with some of the more modern praise music, but it can be a problem with some of the grandest hymns of the church. The issue often is not whay style the song is, but what is the substance? What is the song saying? The problem with some of the songs the church does, praise music or classical hymn, is that the theology is terrible. That song may have a catchy tune and may get us singing along, but what does it say about God? I was thinking about one of my favorites of the contemporary praise songs: “My Jesus, my savior.” Do you remember that one? I love the chorus:

Shout to the Lord, all the earth, let us sing

Power and majesty, praise to the King

Mountains bow down and the seas will roar

At the sound of Your name.

But it starts, and repeats, “My Jesus, my savior, Lord there is none like you.” Something has always rubbed me the wrong way about that line and the lesson from John made me think about that this week. Every one of the gospels tells this story about Jesus feeding the multitudes. It must have been a wonderful miracle. But in this passage John includes other things that made me wonder. John says that the crowds were so filled with amazement that they were about to come and take Jesus by force to make him king. And then he withdrew to the mountain by himself. And then later when the disciples are out on the rough seas, they see Jesus walking on the water. They are frightened but he tells them not to be afraid. Then they wanted to take him into the boat, but immediately the boat reached the land toward which they were going. Twice in this passage people try to make Jesus do what they want him to do: to become their king or to get into their boat. And I think that's what bothers me about that song, and probably about much Christian music old and new. It's often about what God has done for us. Jesus is mine. Jesus is my savior. He belongs to me. It's a short step from there to getting God to do our will rather than to desire to do God's will. My Jesus. Is he mine or am I his?

Jesus refused to be the king that the crowds wanted. Jesus didn't get into the boat to go where the disciples wanted. How often is that us? When we pray, do we ask for what we want? God, do these things for me. How often do we ask him to bless our plans, to lend his strength to our efforts? Now, don't get me wrong, that's not a bad thing to pray that way, we should do it more. But remember we always add, “in Jesus' name.” Which means we want to pray as Jesus would have us pray. We want our will to be in line with God's will and if it's not, God, please forget it. It is more important that we seek God's way than to ask his blessing on our way. Christ of the upward way, my guide divine, where thou hast set thy feet, may I place mine. Do we want to go with him? Or do we want him to come with us?

Maybe we don't want to pray that way because it's so hard to see where that will take us and we're not sure we want to go that way anyway. Like Philip, who thinks that feeding all these people is a crazy idea, Jesus can't be serious. Following in Jesus way, rather than having Jesus come with us means to walk in paths of service, even if it means using the small amount that we have, which according to Philip will make no difference at all. Last week we took about 70 cases of water to Flint to distribute to citizens there who are struggling with the safety of their water supply. Pastor Rob of the church we delivered to was telling me of the place in New York who delivered 21 semi trucks full of bottled water to their church, but he was just as grateful for our offering, because it will help some people, and Jesus does not follow us, we follow him and he is the one who fed the multitudes.

We watch the news these days and may say to ourselves, what can we do when there are so many things that are wrong? That's what Philip was thinking. What can 5 loaves and a couple of fish do? When we think of what we can do, the answer is always, "not enough." But that is the human point of view, and we are God's, God is not ours.

In 1946, when Agnes Gonxha Bojaxhiu came face to face with the masses of suffering and dying people in Calcutta, she experienced what she called the "call within the call," namely, to serve those suffering the most. What resources did she have? Not much but just a passion for the poor and she began the Missionaries of Charity, a small order of 13 members. In the ensuing decades, the order grew to thousands of members giving care in many orphanages and charity centers. Today no one doubts that Mother Theresa has made a difference in the world. She believed that she was used by God, not God by her.

In 1976 when Millard and Linda Fuller began Habitat for Humanity International, there were few resources and a great need for affordable and decent housing for the working poor. With a few tools and a small group of volunteers, it would have been easy to ask, "What is this among so much poverty?" Yet following Jesus compelled them onward and now more than 800,000 houses later, they know that following Christ is our call, not having Christ follow us. Ephesians says "to him who by the

power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly for more than all we can ask or imagine.” He is at work within us. And leading us to serve, even with our small efforts.

O Master let me walk with thee, in lowly paths of service free. Because that's where following Jesus takes us. But remember the story of the blacksmith?

Once upon a time there was a blacksmith who worked hard at his trade. The day came for him to die. The angel of death was sent to him and much to the angel's surprise he refused to go. He pleaded with the angel to make his case before God, that he was the only blacksmith in the area and it was time for all his neighbors to begin their planting and sowing. He was needed. So the angel pleads his case before God. He said that the man didn't want to appear ungrateful, and that he was glad to have a place in the kingdom, but could he put off going for a while? And so God left him there.

About a year or two later the angel came back again with the same message: the Lord was ready to share the fullness of the kingdom with him. Again the man had reservations and said: “A neighbor of mine is seriously ill, and it's time for the harvest. A number of us are trying to save his crops so that his family won't become destitute. Please come back later.” And off the angel went again.

Well, it got to be a pattern. Every time the angel came, the blacksmith had one excuse or another. The blacksmith would just shake his head and tell the angel where he was needed and decline. Finally, the blacksmith grew very old, weary, and tired. He decided it was time, and so he prayed: “God, if you'd like to send your angel again, I'd be glad to come home now.” Immediately the angel appeared, as if from around the corner of the bed. The blacksmith said: “If you still want to take me home, I'm ready to live forever in the kingdom of heaven.” And the angel laughed and looked at the blacksmith in delight and surprise and said: “Where do you think you've been all these years?” He was home. He was in God's kingdom.

We serve in God's kingdom, not he in ours.