

THE BREAD OF LIFE, part 2 **A Sermon on John 6:26-35**

By Rev. Russell B. Smith

Beggars are the blind who are led
Beggars are the hopeless who are given a future
Beggars are the lost who are given new life

It was homecoming Sunday. Hundreds of people returned to celebrate the church's heritage. The pastor stepped up to the pulpit and said, "It is my honor to tell you that Miss Betty Lou Waxhaw is here. She is ninety-six years old, and one of the oldest members in the church. And to honor her today, we're going to let her choose our first three hymns." He went down to the front row where Betty Lou Waxhaw was seated and said, "Betty Lou, which three hymns do you choose?" She looked up at him with a twinkle of mischief in her eye. "I get to choose three hymns, eh?" "Yes ma'am, three hymns." She stood up, turned to face the congregation, and pointing her cane out at three strapping young gentlemen she said, "I'll take him and him and him!"

In John 6:26-35 we looked at the beginning of the famous "Bread of Life" discourse, where Jesus defined himself as the bread of life. We saw that the bread of life is whole food not junk food, it is for beggars not buyers, and it is a diet not a meal. In John 6:35-59 we continue with the bread of life discourse, this time focusing on the people God chooses to receive the bread of life: the beggars. Remember that we established that we, as beggars, are not in control here. God doesn't *need* us, but it is his good pleasure to *have* us. So, this passage tells us who we are as we come to Jesus. We beggars are the blind, the hopeless, and the lost. And we beggars need the bread of life.

In John 6:35-40, we note that beggars are blind, but they are also led. In verse 36, Jesus says, "You have seen me, yet do not believe." Physical sight here does not guarantee spiritual insight; it does not provide the perspective that enables one to understand spiritual realities. But in verse 37 Jesus follows this with a guarantee that he will not cast out "all that the Father gives" him. And again in verse 39: "This is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose none of all that he has given me." Verses 44-45 repeat this theme: "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him." In other words, all of us are blind and must be led by the Father to the place where we can have spiritual insight.

This is a hard truth to discover. We like our spirit of rugged individualism. We have the image of being self-made men, of being people who, against all odds, carve out a destiny for themselves and make their own future. We like to sing with Frank Sinatra, "I did it my way." But the truth is that we are all blind and

stumbling in the dark. The truth is that our only hope is for God to take us by the hand and lead us to a safe place.

This picture of God intervening in our lives and leading us should not have been surprising to Jesus' Jewish audience. However, as John wrote his gospel, targeting people who were influenced by Greek philosophy and the Greek worldview, he must have known that this would be an astounding statement.

This is where a philosophy lesson comes in handy. While the Hebrews believed in one God who entered into special relationship with his people, the Greek mind was influenced both by paganism and abstract philosophy. Paganism saw a multiplicity of gods who pursued their own agendas and sometimes involved themselves in the affairs of men when it advanced their divine agendas. An example of this worldview would be the epic poem *The Iliad*, which explains that the Greek war with the Trojans began with a dispute among three goddesses who used humans as pawns in their dispute.

Abstract Philosophy, on the other hand, tended to view the gods, or God, as a divine other. Plato envisioned God dwelling in an ideal world and not concerning himself with humanity. Aristotle, on the other hand, envisioned God as a great "unmoved mover" whose whole purpose was as a logical first cause, not as a creative personal being.

These trends in Greek thought developed by the time of the New Testament into the philosophy known as Stoicism, which generally saw the world through fatalistic lenses. Stoics believed that history is a cycle that repeats itself exactly. When the world is destroyed at the end, it will then be reformed and follow the exact same path it followed before. Each of us will live the exact life we lived before. Our only hope in the face of such fatalism, is resignation. We resign ourselves to this life that we are fated to live over and over again for all eternity.

John's announcement that God is concerned for his people and enters into relationship with them would have astounded those coming from a Greek perspective. John was not a fatalist like the Stoics. Rather, he was so convinced of even his own utter blindness that he depended upon God to come along side him and lead him to truth – and he taught us to do the same because we share that blindness. This is basically the same thing that Paul taught in Romans 1:20-22 when he spelled out the human inability to perceive truth. In other words, we don't apprehend truth by our superior powers of mental deduction. Rather, God reveals truth to us, leading us step by step along the way. Thus, we are not rugged individualists and we are not pawns in the hands of higher cosmic powers. We are helpless and blind, yet God chooses to lead us to a place of rest.

So, not only are beggars the blind who are led, but they are the hopeless who are given a future. Look at how John puts it in verses 44-45: rather than staying in the grave, believers will be raised at the last day – this is the hope upon which all else hangs! Even so, there are many who believe there is no resurrection. There are even people in the Christian church who don't believe in Christ's resurrection – I know it sounds odd, but there are.

Back in the early 1970's, catholic writer Henri Nouwen diagnosed the peculiar position of late 20th-century humanity. He described this position as being "nuclear man" – this was the first generation that lived under the real spectre of the global annihilation of human life. Because of the power of nuclear weaponry and the tension of the Cold War, the generation that came of age in the early 1970's faced the prospect that there would be no future at all. Our increasing technological prowess now has the potential to destroy us completely. We see that prospect explored in such contemporary science fiction films like the *Terminator* series, where advanced robots take over the world and attempt to eliminate humans from the planet. Or more recently, *The Matrix* depicted a world run entirely by a computer system, and humans were slaves whose neurological energies were used to power the system. This dilemma of "nuclear man" has not gone away with the Cold War's passing. Concerns about genetic engineering of crops, environmental degradation, and the increasing resistance of disease to our toughest medicines all keep this possibility gnawing in the back of our imaginations.

Nouwen, in his book *Wounded Healer*, said that this condition, this outlook of the nuclear man, has several deleterious effects. First, nuclear man is cut off from the wisdom of other ages: if there is no future, then there is no point in connecting with the past. Second, nuclear man rejects the concept of absolutes: since there is no future, nothing holds absolutely; reality is continually being made up on the fly. Third, nuclear man has vitality and energy sucked out of him: if there is no future, there is no aspiration or hope, and therefore there is no meaning or purpose. Instead of enjoying and building upon the towering accomplishments of prior generations, nuclear man is reduced to scrabbling for self-gratification before the end comes. The great cathedrals of Europe, which took the cooperation of several generations to produce, could never be produced by nuclear man.

Nouwen's description of nuclear man gives us a picture of the modern manifestation of hopelessness; it's the modern picture of the beggar begging for hope. As the apostle Paul points out in 1 Corinthians 15:13-19, there is hope because there is a future. But if there is no resurrection, then there is no hope; if there is no resurrection, then there is nothing after the end. But then in verse 20, he boldly proclaims that Christ is risen, and that Christ is only the firstfruits – he is only the start of the great harvest of resurrection that God has planted among

the faithful. But we don't craft that future – it is granted to us by Christ. In verse 45, we see a quote from Isaiah 54:13. The context of that quote (which both Jesus and his hearers knew) dealt with the future kingdom of God, a kingdom of peace where people could live in prosperity. The wording used in Isaiah is: "All your sons will be taught by the Lord, and great will be your children's peace." Jesus reminded his hearers of the future in which they hoped – a future of delighting in a relationship with our Maker. In this passage, Jesus demonstrated that whoever is genuinely taught by God – whoever is genuinely in relationship with God – comes to Jesus. And whoever believes in Jesus has everlasting life.

So, beggars are the blind who are led, and they are the hopeless who are given a future. Beggars are also the lost who are given new life. In John 6:53 Jesus used a distasteful image to make a point. He didn't mean actually and physically to eat his body and blood. He meant that spiritually we need to digest the sacrifice of his body and blood on the cross. In other words, we put our faith and hope only in Christ's sacrifice of himself. Jesus says that if we do not do this, then we have no life in us – no lasting satisfaction, no meaning, no purpose. Jesus leaned heavily on this eating flesh and drinking blood because it was distasteful and offensive. He purposely offended his hearers in order to reveal their pride. Their pride in their Jewish heritage, particularly in being a chosen people delivered by Moses, stood in the way of their understanding the unexpected messiah who stood before them. He revealed that if they relied upon their heritage to save them, they would be lost: "Your fathers ate the manna and died" (John 6:58). We can't rely on credentials or accomplishments to earn our way into heaven. There is never any way we can please God enough to buy our way into heaven. But he who eats this bread – he who has faith in the sacrifice of Christ – will have eternal life.

So each of us is a beggar. We are the blind who are led; we are the hopeless who have been given a future; we are the lost who have been given a new life. God doesn't need us, but it is his good pleasure to have us – to lead us, to give us a future, and to give us new life. You think about that. Amen.