

John 6:41-51

“Come Down”

Did anyone ever look up at you and say, “Come down here”? Like maybe when you were upstairs at home and it was dinner time, or when you had climbed up in that oak tree in the backyard, or gone onto the roof of the house, or into the hayloft in your granddad’s barn, and your mom or dad yelled up, “Come down!” and you knew that meant, “I told you not to go up there! Now come down here and get your whipping!” Or maybe “Come down” has to do with attitude, as in, “Come down off your high horse,” or “It’s time to come down from your ivory tower and get a job.” Climbing up is so often a getaway for us, and coming down is our descent back into the real world. When I think of this phrase “come down,” I can’t help but think of Jesus on the mount of transfiguration where his clothing became blindingly white, and his face shone with glory, and a voice spoke out of the cloud, “This is my Beloved Son!” But then he comes down from the mountaintop, right into a shouting crowd, and the scholars of the Law arguing with his disciples. It is that kind of situation here in our passage, people grumbling, muttering as Jesus talks about himself having “come down.”

Perhaps the place we need to begin is to see that these people in our scripture think they know who Jesus is. They already have him figured out, and think that

maybe he's putting on airs, elevating himself above them, while actually he is doing just the opposite; he has *come down*, he has abased himself, has become the "servant of all" as the gospels tell us elsewhere. We may be just like the people here, thinking we have Jesus figured out, but he surprises us, too. He has come down, and we think that means how high and noble and mighty he is, but it's just the opposite; he has come down as the bread of life. Jesus has come down as a sacrifice, not as a king. That is the meaning of verse 51, where Jesus says that his flesh is the bread he gives for the sake of the life of the world; that is, the world kills, consumes his flesh, and that is the very thing that gives life to the world.

We read this scripture, and we think we know what it means. We read "the bread of life" and equate it immediately with the loaf of bread we share at the Lord's Table. It is that, but even more. We want to say that he is the bread of life, and that if we eat the communion meal, we will live; and that is true, but it is more than that. He is the bread of life that has come down from heaven. When he was the Son of God in heaven, he was *life*, but when he came down, he came down as bread, he came as this humble thing, he came down in fact to be humiliated, to be a sacrifice, he came to be the bread that the world devoured. And we must not be so shallow as to limit our discussion of this passage to whether the communion loaf

becomes literal human flesh as the priest prays over it, or remains merely a symbol, or is something in between; so much more important is the understanding that this is God's Son, the Messiah, the Lord of Glory, Love Himself, who has come as an offering for us; and that, as we share the elements of communion, he calls us to share in this same kind of life that he lived: to be broken bread and poured out wine for others.

I said earlier that climbing up is retreat- or an escape from the world or from noise or danger. Think of a cat climbing a tree to escape a dog. But climbing is also a metaphor for ambition; and there is a sense in which we can understand it as ambition in the spiritual world. Think of those adventurers who scale the tallest mountains, not just for the fame of it, but out of some deeply personal or internal drive, even a spiritual need to challenge themselves, to discover their limits, and to overcome them. It is a spiritual test that can be either positive or negative. It is positive if the explorer- or any of us- comes to understand better the meaning of being human, but negative and destructive if the quest becomes ego-centric, and self-sufficiency or the desire for success takes the place of God and other people.

And that is true in religion. Religious people also want to climb higher, to challenge themselves, discover their limits, and to overcome them. So there are

guidelines we create to let us know how we are doing, rules and instructions that we try to keep. There are many commandments in the Bible, important rules that help us live our lives. But we have the wrong idea about them if they are just stepping-stones or guideposts that show us the way to achieve a certain level of spirituality, or even how to live a pure life. The purpose of these rules is to keep us in perfect contact with God, to maintain that relationship with the One who loves us, and with all the other creatures he has made and loves. So religion is wrong if it is only about making me *better*, if it is only about satisfying my personal spiritual ambition or making a way for me to escape; rather, it must be about worshiping and thanking God and serving others. And if that is true, then real religion is about *coming down* and not about going up. And our perfect example is Jesus Christ, the bread of heaven who has come down to give life to us all.

Verse 44 has it this way, “No one can come to me unless the Father *draws* him.” That is, we can’t get to Christ on our own, we can’t achieve Christ’s life by our own talent and goodness. It is God who works primarily, and who has worked originally, to make us his own. And we should think of God’s “drawing” us as not so much that here is the exalted Messiah, righteous and sinless, and God’s power pulls us like a tractor beam in a space movie up to Jesus and to salvation. Rather,

it is more like this. Jesus has *come down*, and the mercy of God shows us our need for his love and grace so that we are brought out of our own striving to climb higher and our accomplishments and measuring ourselves over against all the rules, and are *drawn down* to be with the Lord of all the earth as he serves others. He calls us to come down and to forsake all that kicking and struggling to reach perfection or to be right all the time, and just to be his.

A reading from two or three days ago in our little devotional booklet recalls one of the humble moments of our Lord that should help us understand him: when he knelt to wash the feet of the disciples.

Lord, you hold my naked feet in your hands and I feel within the protest arising, “No, Lord, you shall never wash my feet.” It is as if I were resisting the love you offer me, and I want to say that you don’t really know me, my dark feelings, my pride, my lust, my greed; and that my heart is so far from you, even if I do speak the right words. I am not good enough to belong to you. But you look at me with utter tenderness, saying, “I want you to be with me, to have a full share of my life. I want to wash you completely clean so that you and I can be one and so that you can do to others what I have done to you.” And so, I have to let go of all my

fears, distrust, doubts, and anguish, and simply let you wash me clean and make me your friend whom you love with a love that has no bounds. (Henri Nouwen)

That is the meaning of Jesus having come down, and it is the humble place where we meet him, where we let go of our ambitions and pride, and discover who he really is and what we are meant to be.

Last week Horton Foote died, Pulitzer Prize winning playwright, and two-time Academy Award winner for the screenplays “To Kill A Mockingbird” and “Tender Mercies.” I worked on three movies he wrote, and he was certainly one of my favorite famous people. (Somewhere I have a picture of me holding the Oscar he had won just the night before.) The last movie of his I worked on was 8 or 10 years after I had last seen him, and I remember the pleasure I felt when he greeted me, “Michael, how nice to see you again.” Even though I was sure he had asked someone who I was, it was a thrill that he spoke my name, because he was famous in circles that were important to me, but even more because I had such respect for him as a truly good man. Don’t you feel honored just to know some people?

One essayist from the Christian Science Monitor wrote an appreciation of Horton Foote a couple of days ago, writing how “in his plays, Mr. Foote grappled

with the great themes of human existence: love, despair, home, family, identity, redemption”; and then ended his remembrance quoting Mr. Foote’s own words, “I have enormous respect for human beings because they are asked to take on a lot. I don’t think there is an easy solution (to knowing what kind of man or woman you are). But I think the journey is what you finally have to be satisfied with, and not be afraid of the lessons you have to learn. It ends up as grace. And you grow, you find a way to continue.”

This is what I want to say, as a word of discipleship. Our “coming down” to be with Jesus and to be like Jesus is a journey; to get off our high and mighty ideals, and come down from our earnest striving and pride, and to go where the hurting people are. It ends up as grace: to learn, to grow, to continue on; to go where our Lord has gone.