

Looking to the King  
John 6:1-15

In case you missed it, I portrayed a man named Henry Devine during the Whispers in the Cedars tour of Wintergreen Cemetery yesterday. He was, to put it mildly, a little worked up about the Presidential election of 1844. And I did ham it up more than a little. But all joking aside, this is what was really written on his tombstone: "During the prolonged illness that preceded his death, he expressed a wish only to live long enough to vote for HENRY CLAY for the PRESIDENCY. His wish was granted. The last act of his life was to vote the WHIG TICKET, having done which he declared that he died satisfied. His remains were followed to the grave by his fellow members of the Port Gibson Clay Club and by them this stone is erected."

Now, think about that for a second. Many people in those days would have Bible verses or expressions of faith in God carved on their tombstones. But all he wanted to do was to vote for Henry Clay for President.

So, how justified was his faith? Well, however popular Clay may have been here in Southwest Mississippi, James K. Polk defeated Clay soundly throughout the state as a whole, winning 25,126 votes to Clay's 19,206. And even if it was by a much closer margin, Clay also lost on the national level. So, regardless of Henry Devine's passionate devotion, he and the rest of the members of the Port Gibson Clay Club were in fact backing a loser.

But even if Henry Clay had won, would that really have made so much of a difference to Henry Devine? Would Clay have been able to keep the cotton bubble from bursting, as it eventually would in 1860? Come to think of it, could the election of Henry Clay have kept Henry Devine from dying two days after the election? In fact, given his obviously significant health issues, did it really make that much sense for Henry Devine to place so much faith in any human politician?

Of course he wasn't the only person who has ever gotten too wrapped up in politics, right? Our modern political discourse has become so strident not just because our society is increasingly polarized, but mainly because we expect so much out of our politicians. If we didn't think political leaders could solve so many of our admittedly serious problems, we wouldn't be so concerned with who gets elected, would we?

But putting too much stock in human leaders isn't only a problem for Americans. Just look at how the people responded to Jesus' miracle in today's passage. Oh, they quickly realized what He was doing. They were after all in a remote location, and there was no obvious source of food anywhere around. Their predicament was clear. And yet, Jesus' disciples told them all to sit down, and then somehow kept bringing out bread and fish for them, as much as everyone wanted. They already knew that Jesus had been healing people in amazing ways, and now this – He could make food miraculously appear!

So, they did come to the right conclusion about Jesus' identity in verse 14, for none of the Old Testament prophets, not even Elijah or Elisha had ever done miracles on such a grand scale. No, it was obvious to everyone that Jesus was in fact the Great Prophet Moses had predicted would come some day. It was obvious that He was the Messiah, the anointed ruler God had promised would rule over David's kingdom forever.

Okay, so given that they were right about Jesus' identity, and the divine source of His power, what did they plan to do about it? Verse 15 says they wanted to take Jesus by force and to make Him king. In other words, they wanted Jesus to keep on providing for their physical needs, and they were prepared to do whatever it took to make that happen, even if that meant becoming the violent sort of mob that has become all too common in our modern political context.

But how much sense did that make? I mean, if Jesus was the Great Prophet, and He was, shouldn't they have listened to what He told them about God's will instead of charging ahead with their own plans? And if Jesus was the royal Son of David, and He was, shouldn't they have humbly submitted to His will, instead of trying to impose their will on Him?

So, why would they allow such a foolish, violent plan to flow out of what was really a correct conclusion about Jesus' identity? Perhaps, like Henry Devine, they were consumed with the thought that if they just had the right ruler, everything in their lives would somehow be okay. Maybe it was because they were so desperate for Jesus to meet their physical, worldly needs, that they couldn't, or wouldn't, listen to what He had to say about His real mission.

For what was that mission? Why was Jesus born of the Virgin Mary? Why did He come to live in our world and to share in our human suffering? It wasn't primarily to meet our physical needs. No, in our responsive reading, Jesus made it clear that He came to give a much greater gift: His body, His blood to pay the penalty that all our sins deserve. He came to restore our relationship to God, to reconcile us so completely that He, that God Himself would come to live inside of us, just as the bread and wine go inside of us when we take the Lord's Supper.

The crowd didn't want to hear about all that spiritual stuff – they just wanted another free lunch. And Jesus' disciples weren't much better. Later on in this chapter when He told them that they had to take Himself inside of them in order to have eternal life, when He said that they had to eat His flesh and drink His blood, many of them abandoned Him. A powerful worldly ruler they could understand. A miracle-working prophet they could understand. But a King on a cross? A self-sacrificing Lamb of God? They just couldn't get it.

Okay, so what about us? Like Henry Devine, like the 5000 men who ate the bread and fish, are we still looking to human rulers, to political solutions to our problems? Is our primary focus on the material things of this life? If so, there's really nothing on this table that can help us. This sip of juice and this tiny cracker won't make a bit of difference in how hungry we will be for lunch later on.

And no matter what the TV preachers say, Jesus has never promised to make our earthly lives easier. He's never promised to satisfy all our material desires. And even though He does provide for our needs and even though we can all attest to many examples of His healing power, none of these physical blessings are guaranteed to last. In this life, all healing is temporary. No meal, however sumptuous, keeps hunger away forever.

So, if you still think that this life is all about what you can get out of the deal, there's really nothing for you here. After all, Jesus Himself told the crowd later on John chapter 6 that even though they had seen Him with their own eyes they hadn't believed, hadn't really trusted in Him. So, if you aren't really interested in following Jesus, in living the same sort of self-sacrificial life of love, or if you just don't know what this ceremony is all about, then this table isn't for you.

But if you have been baptized and have made a public profession of faith in Christ, if you are willing to accept Jesus on His terms, if you want to follow Him as Lord, if you are truly trusting Him as Savior, then He is spiritually present for you in this bread and this fruit of the vine. This table isn't just for members of this congregation or denomination. For this is what Jesus also said later in John chapter 6: "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst..... All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out. <sup>38</sup> For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. <sup>39</sup> And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. <sup>40</sup> For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day."

If that's the assurance you want, if that's the sort of blessing you seek, come to the table – Jesus is here for you.