

John 6: 1-21
Creekside COB
July 30, 2006

“Let the Mystery Be”

I heard a song on the Goshen College radio station that caught my attention. The music wasn't spectacular. I thought of other songs that used the same chord progression. It was written and sung by Iris Dement, a folk singer with a slightly grating, yet pleasant vocal quality. But what it lacked in musical originality was far outweighed by its message. It is titled, *“Let the Mystery Be,”* and goes like this:

*Everybody is wonderin' what and where they all came from.
Everybody is worried 'bout where they're gonna go when the
whole thing's done.
But no one knows for certain and so it always seems to me,
I'll just let the mystery be.*

*Some say once gone you're gone forever and some say you're
gonna come back.
Some say you rest in the arms of the savior if its sinful ways you
act.
Some say you're coming back in a garden, bunch of carrots and
little sweet peas.
I think I'll just let the mystery be...*

Our world abounds with mystery, and I want you talk about what it implies and why we should let it be. Children are, by nature, curious. Their world is full of treasure to be explored. The fallen bird nest in the yard that you walk on by is a source of wonder to them. At times their curiosity leads them to explore what they shouldn't-- like poison ivy or the crystal heirloom that's been in the family six generations. “Leave it be!” we tell them.

But leaving *mystery* be, is something quite different. We don't leave or ignore it. Mystery is a gift of God. The mystery of life speaks on it's own terms. We shouldn't try to solve them or figure them out.

When I was in college, I remember the pre-med students carrying plastic bags with a skinned animal inside. They were dissecting cats in anatomy class. They carted their *formaldehyde felines* between the lab and their dorms. To learn cat anatomy, they took Garfield apart, organ-by-organ, sinew-by-sinew, nerve-by-nerve. When they finished, they knew what a cat was. But it wasn't a cat anymore. It was a bag of body parts.

Today's younger generations know there is more to life than what they have been told. They're hungry for the spiritual side of life. They want to experience that great Something or Someone that can't be dissected, cataloged, controlled or replicated in a laboratory. They are open to dreams, signs and wonders that won't yield to reasonable answers designed to explain them away.

You may have seen the Wendy's commercial where a guy tells his girlfriend, "I was eating a Wendy's 99 cent crispy chicken sandwich when a unicorn walked in front of our van!" You're sure she wants to hear about the unicorn. With an, *I-can't-believe-its-true* look she asks, "Did you say Wendy's has a 99 cent crispy chicken sandwich?"

Jesus asked, "What kind of parent, if asked by their child for bread, would give them a rattlesnake?" Our young people want to learn about Unicorns and they get chicken sandwiches. They

know something is missing from the world we've given them. They have a hunch there is no meaningful life that does not account for God.

Peter Gomes said, "Mystery is not an argument for the existence of God; mystery is an experience of the existence of God." Mystery has to do with all the experiences in life that don't fit together into neat categories." For example, God is three distinct entities, yet God is one. Jesus was fully human *and* fully divine. Let's say you're daydreaming in church. You look at Jan as she stands to lead a song, but she doesn't look herself. Something like an aura surrounds her. Her smile is a ray of light. You look at her eyes, but they are not hers. They are Christ's eyes looking directly at you in a way too beautiful to describe. You stand awestruck, unaware that a hymn is being sung. The next thing you know, its hymn is over, Jan motions, and you sit with everyone else, wondering what happened.

The disciples often wondered, "*What's going on here?*"

In our text, Jesus feeds 5,000 people. Verse 2 says, "And a multitude followed him, because of the signs he performed." The text should say, "And a multitude *kept following* him..." The Greek root implies followers who were more than just curious. It means "a commitment above all others." Five thousand people wanted to know who Jesus was. Being in his presence was awesome, and they didn't want it to end. Jesus crossed the Sea of Galilee in a boat while a crowd 5,000 dropped what they were doing and without hesitation walked miles around the Sea to meet him on the other side.

Our journey with Jesus takes effort. We falter and fall, but his faithfulness is constant. We discover that persistence with him

reveals his preference for us. The more Jesus is invited into our decisions and dreams, the more likely we are to encounter him in the mysteries of life.

Being from Ohio, I know how nuts Buckeye fans are about Ohio State football. But its nothing compared to the long-suffering allegiance of Chicago Cubs fans. The Cubbies have again shown how to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory. But win or lose, Cubs fans are faithful. The greatest example of their intense loyalty is seen when a ball is hit into the stands by the opposing team. Everyone who goes to the ballpark wants a souvenir baseball, but when the other team hits it, the fans throw it back on the field! If it's not off a Cub player's bat, they don't want it!

Experiencing Jesus requires aligning our lives with his. Will you continue following him, though you must drop everything and hike to the other side of the sea to be with him? Are you committed to giving everything to him—your time, your tithes, your family, your work, your friendships, your intentions, your failures, your future, your life... and throw back what the opposition throws your way? Persistence with him reveals his preference for us.

Another insight has to do with questioning our perceptions and trusting God's power. Seeing the crowd coming, Jesus asked Phillip, "What will it take to feed these folks?" Phillip turned into Walt Gilliland. He checked the balance in the benevolence fund, crunched the numbers on his calculator and said, "There's no way!" Andrew mulled it, went into the crowd and fetched a kid with barley bread and dried fish lunch. "Can you do something with this?" Andrew asked, wanting to believe Jesus could, and yet unsure.

Five thousand ate their fill and there were twelve baskets of leftovers. Our calculations cannot contain the power of God. We see through the lens of limited possibilities. But nothing is impossible with God. Before engaging the opposition, we count our battalions. God put his hand on a shepherd boy who took out the giant Goliath with a slingshot. In church we greet budgets and visions with an attitude of scarcity. We create spreadsheets and decide by what the paper says-- "It can't be done." But God's doesn't work on paper. It's writes on our hearts, and amazing things happen when we decide to live out of God's abundance.

Calculations cannot contain God's power. Here's how Frederick Buechner put it: "To say that God is a mystery is to say that you can never nail him down. Even on Christ the nails proved ultimately ineffective."

When we think about mystery, mystics, or mysticism, we think in otherworldly terms--visions, angels, brilliant lights with or without vocal accompaniment, indescribable experiences. Kathleen Norris tells a story of a friend who is a monk. He was interviewed by a journalist who wanted the monk to describe his religious experiences. He expected him to have spectacular stories. But the monk kept saying that he didn't know how to separate his religious experiences from any other. Finally he simply said, "I go to church."

In Galatians Paul speaks of, "*Christ living in me.*" With Christ in us we *may* experience profound mysteries. But our spiritual ancestors teach us that God's mysteries are manifest in ordinary life. With Christ in us, we see God's holiness in everything God has made, especially within others and us.

The Greek philosopher Epictetus was born a slave. He was a weak and lame child. If he couldn't be a productive member of society when he became an adult, he would be "terminated." One day the impaired lad entered a lecture hall where the Stoic philosopher Musonius Rufus was giving an address. Epictetus was enthralled. Week after week he hung around the hall soaking in the words and wisdom of the famous philosophers.

Not long afterward, people came to hear Epictetus speak. The former slave said to them: *"There is but one way to tranquility of mind and happiness. Let this therefore be always ready at hand with thee, both when thou wakest early in the morning, and when thou goest late to sleep, to account no external thing thine own, but commit all these to God."*

All that we have and all that we are, God has provided. When we follow, God reveals His preference for us. When we realize that our perceptions are partial, we can trust God knows the whole picture. When all our calculations and attempts at control go nowhere, we realize that God's power is all there is.

When we witness things that baffle us, or wonder why things happen as they do, or have experiences that words can't describe, we come to realize that mystery is the stuff of every day. When it happens, however it happens, don't try to make sense of it. Don't analyze it. Thank God for it, and let the mystery be.