

“Missing the Point” by Elizabeth Gelfeld

August 2, 2015



The Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

Somewhere in the scripture readings for today, there is a point to be gained, a mystery explained, an illumination, an “Aha!” moment. I’m quite sure that I’m missing it. And yet, as our Reflection reminds us, “Certainty is missing the point entirely.” So, even in my certainty that I’m missing the point, I’m still ...missing the point.

So, I’ll just say right off the bat that I’m not going to be trying to make any points with this sermon because, if I did, you would certainly miss them. And, if I don’t make any points, perhaps that will leave you free to make your own.

Let the words of my mouth

and the meditation of my heart

find favor in your Heart

O my Beloved, my strength and my joy!

[Psalm 19, in *Psalms for Praying*, by Nan C. Merrill]

Our scripture readings today give us plenty to ponder about missing the point. King David has seduced the wife of his army officer Uriah, impregnated her, and, when the good and loyal soldier Uriah thwarts David's plan to get away with this by refusing to enjoy respite with his wife, David makes sure he gets killed in battle. Then, when the Holy One sends Nathan the prophet to tell David a parable of his wrongdoing, David totally misses the point and Nathan has to spell it out to him.

A lot of stories in the gospels are about Jesus disciples – his closest friends, the ones who left everything to follow him – missing the point. Constantly. Jesus patiently explains the point to them, again and again. They never seem to get it and, frankly, neither do I. Today's lesson is a good example. The Gospel of John is mysterious in general, and today's reading is especially filled with puzzling language.

6:24 So when the crowd saw that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they themselves got into the boats and went to Capernaum looking for Jesus.

6:25 When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, "Rabbi, when did you come here?"

6:26 Jesus answered them, "Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves.

6:27 Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal.

Wow. Do you get the point of this? I sure don't.

And then, "the crowd" asks Jesus, "What are the works of God?" – as if this has been a topic of conversation up to this point. And Jesus answers them,

6:29 This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.

I'll bet that, somewhere in our post-Enlightenment history – after Descartes' "I think; therefore, I am" – the entire Church breathed a collective sigh of relief and said, "Ah. *Here's* the point." And so we all clung to that definition – "This is the work of God" – and instruction – "believe in him" –

maybe because at first glance it appears so clear, compared with everything that's led up to it. And so we said, "OK, we get the point. Believe in Jesus, whom God has sent. Easy enough. We can do this."

[*Lectio Divina*](#) is a way of praying with a scripture passage, with no goal of "covering" a text, or understanding it, no goal at all other than being in the presence of God. As with other ways of meditation, the thoughts that arise are not tamped down as "distractions" but rather are given to God as I allow the words of scripture to dialogue with my inner world of concerns, memories, and ideas.

So I tried a little *Lectio Divina* with today's gospel, during a midday walk in the sweltering humidity. And the words that called me to reflection were the words at the end of the passage: "I am the Bread of Life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry." The lovely thing about this way of meditating on scripture is that I don't have to march to the beat of my questions: "What does this mean? How do I translate this spiritual language into something I can live by? Who *are* you, anyway, Jesus?" Those questions are only some of the chorus of dancers in my heart. Another dancer is the memory of a song that was popular in Catholic churches of the 1970s, the post-Vatican II, folk music and guitar mass era. The song is "[I Am the Bread of Life](#)," by Sister Suzanne Toolan, and I'll bet some of you remember it, too.

I am the Bread of life.
You who come to me shall not hunger;
you who believe in me shall not thirst.
No one can come to me
unless the Father beckons.

Refrain

And I will raise you up,
and I will raise you up,
and I will raise you up on the last day.

I was not raised Catholic, but along the course of my spiritual journey I've come to appreciate the Catholic understanding of the "cloud of witnesses" – that the saints who have lived and loved and died are really still present with us, and not just as memories.

During this season, I've been feeling even closer than I usually do to our sister Kate Cudlipp, who died on July 28, 2011. Some of you were not yet part of this community four years ago, so you didn't know Kate. She was a member of Seekers Church since about 1982, she was one of the Servant Leadership Team, a member of Celebration Circle, and in general a pillar of the community. When a bicycle accident left her paralyzed, unable to breathe on her own, yet able to think clearly and communicate with eye blinks, she made the choice to let go of her life gracefully, for the sake of her loved ones, even as all her loved ones, to quote [Diann Neu](#), "stormed the heavens saying every prayer to every divinity we ever knew."

I was in awe of Kate from the first time I met her, and, over the much too short time that I knew her, I came to love her as a friend and spiritual guide. I remember her as someone who was particularly good at getting the point, and then in her gentle-yet-straightforward way explaining it to the rest of us. But when I looked up a few of the sermons she gave here, what I struck me most was her honesty in sharing her own missing the point, and where that led her in her journey.

In her [sermon of October 11, 2009](#), she grapples with the unease she feels about our celebrating success in our everyday ministries and basking in feeling good about what we do. She says that Brenda put words to her discomfort by remembering that, in the conservative church of her youth, this sort of testimony would often elicit this response from someone in the congregation: "Give God the glory!" And Kate, the cradle Episcopalian, says, "Wow – not my style, but what a way to offer praise and thanksgiving. . . . I want to find language and a practice that . . . keeps me aware of the Holy One in whom I and all of creation live and move and have our being."

In another [sermon, November 5, 2006](#), she talks about walking the *Camino de Santiago*, the thousand-year-old pilgrimage route across the north of Spain, with her then-partner, and later-wife, Carole. They walked every day, all day long, for three weeks. Kate wondered whether God had a vision in store for her on this pilgrimage. She thought maybe she saw hints of such a vision in the compassion, laughter, forgiveness, and sharing among fellow pilgrims; but, she says,

I wish I could say that the companions and other signs from the Holy

One brought about a conversion in me, a new turning toward God; that I experienced great clarity about God's call on my life and fewer questions or doubts. That was not the case. I continued to be Kate on the Camino: the risk-averse, want-to-be-prepared, no-surprises Kate.

However, God does not give up. At the end of our pilgrimage, Carole and I arrived in Santiago after five hours of fast-paced walking, just in time for the noon pilgrims' mass in the Cathedral. We walked through the doors as the bells in the tower struck noon. It was Sunday, and there was standing room only. Pilgrims with their backpacks (including us), other tourists and Santiago citizens crowded the nave and transept. At least a dozen priests took their place in the choir, soon to assist in celebrating the mass.

Kate describes how tired she was, and how distracted during the service, which was all in Spanish. But then, as "the priests fanned out through the cathedral" to serve Communion, the organ began to play a familiar tune and the congregation sang, in Spanish of course, "I Am the Bread of Life." When they reached the refrain, Kate sang quietly to herself,

And I will raise them up,

and I will raise them up,

and I will raise them up on the last day.

I was so thankful to hear something that touched my heart. Then a priest appeared a few feet in front of me with the consecrated wafers. I did not intend to join those who lined up to be served, but to my amazement, I began to weep and found myself stepping into the line to receive the Host.

I still do not know what that brief interlude means, but now I see it was a gift, another small glimpse of a new earth. For a moment, I saw the motley group of Christians and others, assembled in the cathedral at Santiago de Compostela, as one people. Individuals who had come from different starting points, apparently motivated by different hopes or dreams, had nonetheless converged on a destination they all had in common. It was a communion of saints.

At the memorial service for Kate, here at Seekers on September 24, 2011, [Diann Neu, Kate's spiritual director and friend, ended her reflection](#) by saying,

I believe this is Kate's legacy to us:

- Love well.
- Lead a reflective life.
- Seek and offer healing.
- Act with justice.
- Walk your pilgrimage.
- Notice God in your midst.
- Don't be afraid to make the ultimate choice.

And to that, all of us might just add, "Thank God we're in this together."