

The Church in Search – John 6: 1-21  
Sermon prepared and preached by Rev. Don Hammond  
For First Central Congregational UCC Omaha, Nebraska  
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Jesus came to the rescue! That is the thread that holds both gospel stories together from this morning's reading. Unfortunately, that is exactly what many Christians hold as the primary expectation of Jesus today. "Jesus, come and rescue me".

- Jesus, rescue me from myself
- Rescue me from my troubles
- Rescue me from the pit I am in
- Rescue me from my tangled mess of relationships.

Now I know there are many people who need a rescuing type of help. I am 100 percent certain that there are a bunch of you who would say, "yes, that is me. I need some rescuing and I want you to give me a Jesus who is going to do that for me. I want you to tell me how Jesus will come into my life and make things better. I want you to tell me how Jesus will come to all of us and clean up not only our personal chaos, but also the chaos that surrounds us." The Church always experiences its most significant growth in times of social or economic trouble.

In our scripture lesson, there were people everywhere. They came from every village, hamlet and farm. Word was out that a great healer and teacher was nearby, and this was the one opportunity to get healed if you were struggling with some kind of ailment. So thousands of people were on the hillside surrounding Jesus. We are told more than 5,000 people were there, and they would not go home to eat. They stayed, hoping to be the next one in line to have Jesus cure their malady. They were hungry and it was Passover, but they did not seem to care. They were going to wait in line and not miss their one chance. Jesus then quizzed his disciples and asked them how they were going to feed all these people? One said, "We can't. We must send them away. Tell them to go home." Another said, "Even if we had enough money to buy food, there isn't any place nearby to buy it." Hey Jesus, are you forgetting where we are? We are way out in the countryside where the sheep graze. Oh Jesus what are we going to do? This is a big problem! Perhaps you can come to the rescue, Jesus.

Of course we know what happened – Jesus did just that. He solved their problem and in some way that is beyond my ability to explain, he takes a few pieces of bread and fish and suddenly there is plenty of food.

Now here is where it gets strange. At the height of his popularity, he slips out the back way. He disappears, but that is only half the story. That night, the disciples are on a boat in the lake when a terrible storm develops and threatens their lives. They were afraid, and once again Jesus comes to the rescue. If you ever wondered where the idea of Superman and Batman came from, here it is. Jesus comes to the rescue! This is the Jesus that most people like and want. The irony is that this is not the Jesus that Jesus liked, which is why he needed to slip away so many times. What Jesus wanted was for his followers to be the people who saw the vast needs and did something about it. He wanted his followers to be the people that saw hungry, broken and frightened people, then did something about it. William Willimon in one of his sermons wrote:

“Instead of doing what the crowds wanted him to do (meet their every need), Jesus turned it around on them, so that they must ask something quite different: ‘Jesus, who are you and what is your mission?’ ”

Being a follower of Jesus and being the Church is about mission, a mission that is ours to reflect the presence of a loving and caring God. As I progress through life, I become more convinced that if the Church is not committed and involved in mission, then it is missing out on the most exciting part of Church. It is sometimes difficult for congregations to sink their teeth into that idea. I am afraid it is true that the most common limiter of mission is money. When congregations are facing financial matters, usually not enough money, they tend to drop mission first. After all, it is often said, “We need to pay our bills.” Any person who has any fiscal sense knows how true that is, but any person who has Church sense knows that once mission is reduced or gone, then the problems deepen.

Not so many years ago I was serving a congregation that, not unlike others, had to be cautious about spending. Every dollar was accounted for. One day I received a telephone call from Church World Services, asking us if we would sponsor a refugee family from war torn Bosnia. Now, I already knew that this was not the first time the congregation had been asked to sponsor a refugee family, and every other time they

turned it down with this reason: “We have neither enough money or people to do that.” But I told the caller that I would make another attempt.

You need to know that this congregation had done a serious “inward” turn, and was doing very little beyond itself, other than providing some food for needy people in the community. This was good, but not terribly significant. So here is what happened. I ran this by a few key people, and I heard the same response as previous attempts received. But one man said, “I don’t know about the others, but I would be willing to help.” All we really needed were perhaps 10 people who would also help, and we might be able to pull it off.

During the worship service I introduced the idea to the congregation, and said that I would meet with any interested people in the library after coffee hour. I already knew what to expect - that one man and myself would be there. When worship was over I never saw people thin out so quickly. Normally people would hang about the back of the sanctuary and talk, but on that day, almost no one hung around. I chatted with the few people who were there, then decided to go back to the two person meeting. When I opened the library door I could not believe my eyes. The library was packed with people. For some reason the people who were always insisting that “we can’t do it” did not prevail. The year that followed is nearly beyond description. That little congregation found housing, furniture, food, clothing, jobs, and English classes. An even greater challenge was securing medical care for the family of five. The father had taken a piece of shrapnel in his arm while in Bosnia, and received inadequate care resulting in a hand that was locked in a claw shape. In a year that tiny congregation raised more money and in-kind contributions than anyone, including me, imagined possible. A few surgeries returned his hand to about 90% usage. The greatest rewards were helping that family, discovering what the congregation was capable of, and having a ministry that went beyond their walls. Even the “nay-sayers” were amazed.

What makes a congregation alive and vital is NOT a sizable budget or even a sanctuary full of people every Sunday morning. Alive and vital is the result of mission. There are many questions you must address about this building (First Central) because it is big and expensive. Perhaps the right way of starting that conversation is with other questions: “How can we best use everything we have to be a congregation with many

missions?” What does the community around us need from us? How can we open and utilize this building in ways that best serve other people?

We all know the economy is terrible. Most of us have had to make changes in our spending habits. Spending habits may have changed, but socializing habits have not. What are we doing as an inexpensive way to offer the community a center for social activity? In nearly every congregation I have been in I have heard these words: “Why should we try something new when we don’t have enough money or people to take care of what we already have?” Because I have seen it with my own eyes - when a congregation steps out and up to do their mission, something happens. Call it the Spirit of God or simply new excitement and energy, but something happens.

Occasionally I get a story in an email that I will want to use. Here is one I received recently that I enjoyed:

*Once upon a time there was a bunch of tiny frogs that arranged a race. The goal was to reach the top of a very high tower.*

*A big crowd had gathered around the tower to see the race and cheer on the contestants. The race began.*

*Honestly: no one in the crowd really believed that the tiny frogs would reach the top of the tower, an impossible goal. You could hear statements such as: “Oh, way too difficult! They will never make it to the top.”*

*Or: “not a chance that they will succeed. The tower is too high!”*

*The tiny frogs began collapsing. One by one, except for those, who in a fresh tempo, were climbing higher and higher.*

*The crowd continued to yell, “It is too difficult!! No one will make it!” More tiny frogs got tired and gave up. But one continued higher and higher and higher. This one wouldn’t give up!*

*At the end everyone else had given up climbing the tower. Except for the one tiny frog who, after a big effort, was the only one who reached the top.*

*Then all of the other tiny frogs naturally wanted to know how this one frog managed to do it? A contestant asked the tiny frog how he had found the strength to succeed and reach the goal?*

*It turned out that the winner was DEAF!*

Fifty-two years ago in this sanctuary and from this pulpit at the General Council meeting of the Congregational Church that that followed a vote to unite in the creation of the United Church of Christ, these words were spoken by James Wagner. It was the meeting that authorized the election of delegates to the uniting General Synod in Cleveland the following year. He talked about the way succeeding generations like ours might assess the worth of the union they had just authorized. This quote of James Wagner is taken from a speech by Rev. John Thomas, President of the UCC:

*“The real worth and validity of this union in the sight of God will eventually be measured by how profoundly and with what deepening devotion we set about getting God's work done in this world. If by the witness of our united churches the world's broken-hearted find hope and healing, the grieving have the comfort and consolations of grace made real, the aged discover that "at evening time it shall be light," if young men and women are wisely guided in the choices they must make and strengthened when they have chosen the hard right against the easy wrong, if men and women in the midst of life's struggle are made "strong in the Lord and in the power of (God's) might," if the imperatives of God's justice and love are brought effectually to bear on the relationships of (people) in our workaday world and of nations wrestling with the promises and the peril of power - that is, not in devising new and grandiose schemes for making the world better, but in doing better the age old ministries to which priest and prophet have always given themselves - then time and the event and the silent whispers of the Eternal God will confirm our present faith that the establishment of the United Church of Christ was the doing of (God's) will.”*

The future of the Church is and always has been based upon nothing less than mission beyond our confines. Mission and determination to do the hard right as opposed to the easy wrong is what makes us into who Jesus calls us to be. That is what the Church of Jesus Christ must be in search of. It is your challenge to rise to the call. The

church in mission is the best investment any congregation can ever make. Be in search of more mission.

Amen.