

August 9, 2015 11th Sunday After Pentecost John 6:35, 41-51

If you've ever adopted a puppy that is a couple months old you know they are about as cute and cuddly as anything can be. They like to romp and play. They like to be petted and roll over and have their belly rubbed. They are sweet and lovable and love to lick you in the face.

They also have some drawbacks. They aren't housebroken so they make messes everywhere. They also like to chew, so you'd better confine them in part of your house and give them chew toys, or you'd better like teeth marks on all your chairs. They tend to be underfoot all the time; like roving tripping hazards. They may tend to be awake when you want to sleep and asleep when you want to play with them.

Puppies need training and boundaries. Perhaps you only care that they don't make messes in the house. Or perhaps you want to teach them tricks, keep them off the furniture, and not let them climb in bed with you. You can do it because dogs are domesticated animals. They're smart and they can be trained to be what you want them to be. They are yours to shape as you choose.

I think people often inadvertently try to domesticate and housebreak God. Instead of us being made in God's image, we tend to want to make God in our image. We want to limit and shape God into our own boundaries and understandings.

This is all very subtle and unintentional on our part, but it happens. Let's start by looking at what is happening in the gospel reading from John 6. We're continuing on from where we left off last week's gospel; so there is a crowd around Jesus and he is speaking to them. When Jesus says that he is, "the bread that came down from heaven," they have a very logical thought: "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, 'I have come down from heaven'?"

That's a good question. Of course John's gospel often portrays dual level conversations where one person is taking things literally and Jesus is speaking on a different level. This is one of those places. The ultimate teaching is that Jesus is the bread from heaven and we receive that bread when we receive communion. That is next week's gospel, which picks up where we leave off for today. We'll let the communion discussion for next week and instead today realize how something

as simple as human logic can begin to limit and domesticate our understanding of God.

Logic says that if Jesus is the child of Joseph and Mary he cannot be the bread that has come down from heaven. If he is bread from heaven then he'd better have some supernatural origins. Now we know the Christmas story so we know that is the case, but his hearers that day did not know that.

Still though, we are logical people. We do what makes sense. We use our brains to gather data and then make reasonable conclusions based on that data. If we weren't logical we wouldn't be as successful as we are.

But we can't let logic limit God. If something doesn't make sense that does not mean that we can automatically rule it out as not being God's will. Logic and godliness are not synonymous.

I don't know if this goes for you, but if given the choice between chaos and order I tend to choose order. I don't have to be obsessive about it, but I like to live a pretty predictable life. And the same goes for our faith lives.

Look at our worship service today. We worship inside in a human-built room with walls and lights and seats and all sorts of things to suit our comfort. Worship itself is planned and orderly. The order of worship is printed in bulletins. The band has prepared music. I have prepared this sermon. The prayers are printed and distributed. About the only thing left to chance is what the kids say during the children's sermon. Oh, I think we leave room for the Spirit to do something spontaneous. We aren't outright rigid, but we don't leave anything to chance either. You can plan your day today knowing worship will take about an hour.

Is faith this orderly? No. As I said before, logic and order are our friends, but they should not begin to exclude what God might have in store.

I suppose there's a passive side to this too that we easily overlook. I bring up many times that churches across our nation are declining. All church denominations are seeing serious drops in attendance and membership. Only in isolated pockets and congregations is there real growth. The reasons for this decline are numerous. All of this bothers me, but ultimately I trust that the church is in God's hands and God's will is going

to be accomplished. The church has had serious ups and downs before.

The thing is, it can be hard to know what to do as a Christian in these circumstances. If you work hard at something, and you succeed, then you feel like you are right and you are doing a good job. You're going to build on your success. Similarly if you fail at something you know you did something wrong. You need to take a different approach. Failure is also highly educational.

But what if God is calling you to something that is failing? How do you work to effectively spread the gospel to everyone you meet if you know for sure from the get-go that you're going to fail?

If the church is failing as a whole then should we continue to invest in it?

It's interesting: 16 years ago I graduated from seminary, came here, and could immediately identify numerous things that should be done and should be changed to help this congregation grow. I pushed for those things. We did many of them, and we grew.

Today I can look at this congregation and still see many things that need work, but I can't honestly say that fixing all of those things would bring about growth. I continue to badger seminary professors, mission developers and bishops about what are the latest and most effective strategies for growth? What kind of continuing education should I seek to be the most effective at leading growth?

The answer is universal - they don't know.

Success and growth tell us we are doing something right and we should keep at it. Failure tells us we are doing something wrong and we should change. That's logic.

And inadvertently we apply that to God. The Jews said, "How can he now say, 'I have come down from heaven'?" And we say, "How can it be God's will for something good to decline and fail?" Yet we are making God in our image.

This is all very challenging. Being a Christian is never easy. It is even harder when you don't know if what you are doing is right and you have no success to prove it. And yet we live and act in trust. We should be bold, be adventuresome, and

stay open to our God who does not play by the rules we think should run this world. Even when things don't make sense we trust in God's goodness anyway. Ultimately we trust in Jesus when he says, "...and I will raise that person up on the last day." That is certainly an illogical thing to believe, but it is the belief we build our hope upon. Amen.