**“The Struggle to ‘Get It’”**

**Sermon by Rev. Tom Warren, Pastor**

**Peace United Church of Christ**

**March 6, 2016**

Many of you, perhaps most of you, know that my first charge coming out of seminary was to a small urban church in New Orleans, Louisiana.  While I was there for nearly six years, I became friendly with a pastoral colleague by the name of Dr. Gary Arndt.  He was in one of the suburban churches in Midori, Louisiana, right outside of New Orleans.  Rev. Gary Arndt was a spiritual director.  He was filled with wisdom about the spiritual journey, and when you were with Gary you could feel that emanating from him.  He was calm and sort of perpetually peaceful and just a wonderful spirit to be around.

We often ended up in cars together driving around New Orleans.  Like any big city, the traffic patterns in New Orleans were quite complicated, so we often ended up in traffic jams together.  He would be at the wheel, and I would be in the passenger’s seat.  In these traffic jams, I would sit there getting agitated, impatient because we weren’t going anywhere.  I would look over at Gary, the spiritual director, and he would be singing “When the Saints Go Marching In”.   I looked at him one day in particular and asked “Gary, why are you singing?”  He asked “What would you like me to do—be agitated and annoyed like you?”  I was.  I was agitated and annoyed over something that I had absolutely no control over.   I wanted to complain!  I wasn’t about to sing.

I remember driving around New Orleans with a young couple from our church—Matt and Jill.  Matt was driving one day and he was getting annoyed at some of the people driving in front of him.  His girlfriend said “Matt, don’t get so annoyed.  You need to pray”.  He said “I am.  I’m praying that guy gets a brain!”  Well, that is me in the passenger’s seat that day.  I wanted to complain.  I think that’s where a lot of us are these days.  We are complainers.  We are a culture that has sort of evolved to be a culture of grievance.  We all have a grievance.  We are ticked off with the way things are going.  We watch our politicians go back and forth, and they are ticked off, so they have grievances with each other, so we are just all kind of complaining.  We are not happy with what is going on in our lives or our world or whatever, so we complain.  We have become this culture of grievance.  We have a grievance or sort of an ax to grind, and we have lots of outlets for how to do that.

The good news is that, as people who like to complain, we are in good company with our scripture.  The Israelites, (or at least the case can be made from the passages that David Murray read this morning) were some of the biggest whiners in history, and their whining has all been documented.  It’s all been written down in the Book.  We can’t forget it because it’s right there and we read it again and again.  The whole world reads about the Israelites whining.  They were always whining.  So, if you remember, their first whine should have been, as it was, when they were in Egypt.  In the scripture in Exodus they cried out.  I love it!  I have said it before.  They weren’t crying out to God.  The scripture doesn’t say they were crying out to God.  They just cried out under their oppression in Egypt.  They were slaves.  They were working extremely hard.  They were very mistreated by Pharaoh and the Egyptian power structure, and the text says they cried out.  **They cried out,** and this voice went up.  This voice of pain went up.  God heard it.  God went into action and liberated those Israelites who cried out.  They began with a cry out, a complaint, a legitimate complaint.  God freed them.  They came out of the Jordan and they had this newfound freedom.  They were not in the wilderness three, four, five or six days and they started to whine again.  They whined at God.  They said “God, You brought us out here to die.  We had it much better back there.  At least we had three hots and a cot.  At least we had food in Egypt”.  They whined again.

God, in God’s gracious mercy, as the story goes, saw their hunger and their thirst.  You can only imagine, at least as I think about it, that perhaps God was reluctantly compassionate at that moment and just wanted to shut them up.  I don’t know, but they were hungry.  God rained down manna and said “I’m going to give you everything you need for every day double on Friday so you don’t go out and work on Saturday.  You will have enough to get you through the Sabbath”, then the story goes that God sends down quails for meat then later on water from a rock, so they whined in bondage.  They whined in freedom, then when they got to the Promised Land in that second reading (and I don’t know if you picked it up) that David read, it talks about the fact that they arrived (in the Book of Joshua) to the Promised Land.  When they got to the Promised Land, the manna ceased.  God’s miracles of feeding stopped, and they started to eat the produce of the land.

Theologians will tell you that this is the beginning of their self-sustenance—their self satisfaction.  They don’t need God anymore.  They don’t need God’s miracles.  They are not dependent on God’s manna or quails or water.   They are going to eat of the land.  They are going to eat the produce of the land and slowly, but surely, over hundreds and hundreds of years, they become self-sufficient, and it leads them to forget how dependent they were on God because they are now self-sufficient.

This long tradition of whining goes right into the New Testament, and these stories of Jesus with the disciples are always filled with wonderful miraculous miracles of feeding and the disciples (and as I’ve said before my wonderful Old Testament professor calls them “duh-ciples”) don’t get it.  We read scripture Gentily.  We kind of keep it calm, but in this scripture I read from Mark, Jesus is ticked off.  He is frustrated because he’s feeding people.  He’s showing the disciples what they have to do.  He’s showing them that this is what the kingdom of God is like, and they get in the boat and they have one loaf.  They don’t have enough.  They had seven baskets full, an abundance of God’s bread, and they don’t have enough, and Jesus asks “Don’t you get it?”  The text says “Do you not yet understand?”  Why don’t they understand?  We have no evidence that the disciples are not smart.  We think they have wonderful intellectual capabilities, but they cannot somehow understand this picture that Jesus is painting for them all along the way.  They are just not getting it.  That question, “Why don’t you understand?” is a question for the ages.  Why don’t we get it?

This is a question that comes out of Sociology Class 101.  Why don’t we get it?  One of my professors in Introduction to Sociology began her class by going around to all the students the first day of class and handing us all three pairs of glasses to wear, so we put on our glasses.  I had glasses already.  She told us to put all three of those on.  I already had one on, so I had four lenses on my face.  She asked “What do you see?”  I couldn’t see a damn thing!  It was all refracted and sort of 3 dimensional, but I couldn’t see anything. No one in the class could see anything.  She began to tell us that Sociology is about identifying those lenses through which we see the world.  What are those lenses that we see the world through?  Everyone has different lenses.  I see the world through my status as a male, my status as a white European male.  I see the world through the lenses of my sexual orientation.  I see the world through my upper middle class background and education.  I have all these lenses through which I see the world.  I see the world through the lenses of being an American.   Jesus said “Why don’t you understand?  You don’t understand because you have got all of these lenses that are preventing you from seeing the kingdom of God—from seeing the most sober perspective on the world that you can get”.  In Sociology, my professor said “Our process in becoming sociologists is about taking off, one at a time, the lenses that color our world”.  Jesus is trying to do that in this story, trying to teach these disciples and give these disciples a new lens through which to see the world.

Our temptation with our lenses (and it is a wonderful temptation that I am certainly susceptible to) is to make our lenses absolute, as if the whole reality of the world is how I see it.  That is my temptation, so it is hard sometimes to see the world through other people’s lenses.  That was brought home most powerfully to me in my first trip to Cuba.  I just sat there that first trip, and I thought “There is another world out here that I didn’t know existed”, so lenses were popping off my head everywhere I went.  Any time we have an experience with the other, we lose lenses and we gain new focus.

Faith, that we are all about, is the call to embrace a new lens, and it is (to use a symbolic gesture) about the lens of the loaves and fishes and miracles.  What Jesus is saying throughout his ministry is that the lens of the loaves and fishes is the lens that anything is possible with God.  Anything is possible with God.  That is the new lens.  It is not a lens of scarcity.  It is not a lens of any kind of absolutely only one way to do things.  It is a lens of God is a God of generosity who feeds us and has lots left over.

This wonderful story today is a reminder that the lens we try to live out of is a lens of absolute abundance, and God’s intent for our lives is the have a life of abundance.  It is not a promise of material prosperity.  It is a promise of God’s spirit and love to heal  our lives and that we can have lives that are filled with love and joy and compassion because that is God’s wonderful lens for our world and for our lives.

Today we are reminded of these disciples who struggled to get it, and we are challenged by Christ to be people of this new lens—the lens of mercy, abundance and joy.  Thanks be to God for the lens of Christ.  Amen.