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John 6:35, 41-51
August 11, 2024

“Know Thyself”
Rev. Dr. Brandon S. Perrine

Jesus said to them, ‘I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. Then the people began to complain about him because he said, ‘I am the bread that came down from heaven.’ They were saying, ‘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”?’ Jesus answered them, ‘Do not complain among yourselves. No one can come to me unless drawn by the one who sent me; and I will raise that person up on the last day. It is written in the prophets, “And they shall all be taught by God.” Everyone who has heard and learned from God comes to me. Not that anyone has seen God except the one who is from God; he has seen. Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live for ever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.’

~o~

Jesus is the bread of life, the author of John’s gospel tells us. Last week I read someone’s post on X that said, “Y’all need to stop with this ‘bread is not good for you’ foolishness. Jesus did not say, ‘I am the broccoli of life.’ Nor did he say, ‘Give us this day our daily kale.’ Stop. Jesus is life. Jesus

is the bread of life. Bread is life.”¹ I kinda like the way this social media philosopher thinks!

In a society like Jesus’ in which over 50% of a person’s daily caloric intake comes from bread, bread literally is life. It makes sense, then, that the same Jesus who says, “I am the resurrection and the life” and “I am the way, and the truth, and the life,” would also be the bread of life, since ‘life’ and ‘bread’ in that society were virtually synonymous. John’s author also tells us that Jesus makes four other claims about his identity. He says: “I am the light of the world,” “I am the gate for the sheep,” “I am the good shepherd,” and “I am the true vine.” John’s Jesus certainly seems to know exactly who and what he is, even if these sayings leave us wondering what he could mean.

Scholars tell us that these seven “I am” statements echo the first utterance of the divine name back in the third chapter of the book of Exodus when the voice from the burning bush told Moses that “I AM WHO I AM” was sending him to free the Hebrews from captivity in Egypt. Reiterating the divine name, the author of John’s gospel claims a sacred identity for Jesus in a way that was unique to their version of the Jesus story. More than just stating who he was, these seven also hint at what his life and death would be about. The Jesus of John’s gospel knew himself and that self-knowledge guided the unfolding story of his life in John’s telling. While John’s “I am” statements claim a new identity for Jesus as compared with the synoptic gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the idea of self-knowledge was not new with John’s author or with Jesus.

At least by the 5th century BCE the maxim “Know Thyself” appeared inscribed on the temple of Apollo at Delphi. In the early 4th century BCE, the philosopher Plato takes up the maxim in a series of fictional dialogues between the deceased philosopher Socrates and a series of conversation partners. In one exchange, Socrates is asked if he believes the Greek myths to be literal truths. Plato’s Socrates profoundly responds that:

¹Brittany Dawn. July 4, 2020: <https://x.com/itsbrittanydawn/status/1279586343019073537>.

I am not yet able, as the Delphic inscription has it, to know myself; so it seems to me ridiculous, when I do not yet know that, to investigate irrelevant things . . . I investigate not these things, but myself.²

For Plato's Socrates, the pursuit of self-knowledge was of paramount importance. By the 3rd century BCE, the philosopher Zeno of Citium emphasized "Know Thyself" as the very essence of wisdom.

There's no question that times have changed more than a little since the Temple of Apollo at Delphi and the writings of Plato and Zeno of Citium in the 4th and 3rd centuries BCE. Times have changed since the Jesus portrayed in the Gospel of John was written into being in the late 1st century CE. And yet, more than 2,000 years later, a plethora of personal inventories are at our fingertips and hosts of books on self-knowledge and self-awareness are just a click or a short trip to the library away. The need to know thyself has not gone away. If anything, it has intensified and hosts of preachers, psychologists, and self-help gurus are only too happy to help tell you the answer.

The question of "Who am I?" is at the very core of our human search for meaning, right along with its sister query, "Why am I here?" These really are the BIG questions that most human beings seek answers to. And they are connected: knowing who we are gives us pretty big clues as to why we're here and what to do with the time we have. Remember John's Jesus: "I am the bread of life." This short phrase answers both questions beautifully. For John, Jesus is the very embodiment of the divine I AM WHO I AM, nourishing hungry spirits in the way only the divine can do.

How we answer the first question about who we are, has direct implications for how we'll answer the second question of why we're here and what we'll do with the time we have. Hence, all the emphasis on the old maxim, "Know Thyself."

² Plato. *Plato in Twelve Volumes, Vol. 9.*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1925.

Both individuals and institutions are forced to wrestle with these questions if they hope to exist in the world with purpose and intentionality. We've just concluded a 2-year-long process of strategic visioning that essentially invited our church to sit with these questions. As a result, we have a vision/identity statement and an action plan for living into it. We state that:

We are New England Congregational Church—a diverse, intergenerational congregation that is redefining how people see church and working to make positive change in our local community and in our world.

- We are forward thinking: With a rich tradition of inclusivity and diversity, we welcome all people—regardless of age, ethnicity, religion, socioeconomic status, mental or physical ability, gender identity or expression, sexual orientation, family/marital status, or political perspective—to create community with us. Rooted in the life and teachings of Jesus, we are not based on any specific creed and take pride in both our traditional setting and our progressive spirit.
- We are spiritually nurturing: By meeting people where they are at every stage of life, we facilitate opportunities for lifelong learning, spiritual enrichment, and fellowship. We cultivate positivity; outside-the-box thinking; an appreciation for diverse perspectives; a love of the arts; and honest, authentic community.
- We are community leading: We are committed to outreach and passionate about social justice. By listening, adapting, and responding, we partner proactively with our diverse neighborhood and changing downtown to serve those who need it most.³

³ Adopted by the Cabinet on 2/27/23.

This is who we are. And knowing who we are allows us to articulate what we are to be about in the world. Our Strategic Action Plan⁴ outlines concrete steps toward living out of our identity including:

- new ways of engaging with our neighbors, partner agencies, and local community;
- taking a good look at our programs and encouraging greater collaboration among boards and committees;
- renewing our commitment to spirited traditional worship while expanding the voices we hear and more effectively welcoming guests;
- assessing our facilities and planning for a more welcoming Hawthorne street entrance;
- effectively marketing New England Church to neighbors and newcomers to our community so that we're no longer Aurora's best kept secret;
- and taking new directions in stewardship and financial sustainability.

It's a beautiful vision and great plan, and it's already bearing fruit! I hope you'll ask folks serving on the Cabinet, boards, or committees to share about their experiences.

This is how we at New England Church are asking, and answering, the big, existential questions of who we are and why we're here. But as individuals, we're invited – though the Greeks phrased it more as a demand – to wrestle with this ourselves. Know Thyself. Don't let anyone

⁴ Adopted by the Cabinet on 7/24/23.

tell you who you are. Listen to the voice within, figure out who you are, and live your life with purpose and intentionality. That's why you're here.

And remember that wherever you are in this process of asking and answering life's big questions, you are among friends, fellow seekers of truth, fellow travelers on the journey of faith and life. You *are* and will always *be* welcome here. Amen.