

“First Step”

John 6

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Our High Hopes youth group had a fabulous mission trip to NYC the first week of August at Greenpoint Reformed Church in Brooklyn – I talked about that briefly during the Life of Hope announcements last Sunday, and this sermon today has been greatly influenced by our very meaningful experience there. In fact, it was such a good trip that while we were there I came up with an idea for a new slogan for Hope Church for your consideration – the new slogan is: *“Hope Church – helping Holland to take the 1st step!”* How do you like it? – I can understand if you’re not too enthusiastic about it – especially since it most likely doesn’t make that much sense to you. ‘...helping Holland take the first step’ – what’s that about, you may be wondering, right? Well, the 1st step in the slogan refers to the 12-steps that are at the core of all addiction recovery programs; the groups that meet to address various addictions – alcohol, drugs, eating, relationships – those 12-step recovery groups meet throughout the country and the world – they meet in NYC and in Holland, MI – perhaps you have been a part of such a program and still are, perhaps you have supported someone in such a program.

A major part of the ministry of Greenpoint is being a host to many addiction recovery groups – the church building is used throughout the week for meetings – and there is a Wednesday evening worship service that is shaped by the spirituality of the 12-step program. Our High Hopes group was blessed to be able to attend the Wednesday service, and the people there were gracious enough to share some of their stories – deeply painful stories of addiction and devastation, deeply powerful stories of honesty and courage, deeply inspiring stories of faith and healing. And although the entire 12-step recovery program is a remarkable expression of spirituality and challenge, part of what struck me was one of the people talking about the 1st step as being the most important step to return to and focus on again and again – and what is that 1st step? ‘that I am powerless over (and then you can name alcohol, or drugs, or eating) – and I cannot manage my own life’ – that’s it... and then this person said – ‘you know, this isn’t just true for addicts, it’s the 1st step for everyone - to admit you are powerless over the brokenness of your life, and you cannot manage it on your own.’ *Hope Church – helping Holland to take the 1st step.*

For the past several weeks we have heard an extended ‘bread story’ in the Gospel of John – John chapter 6 – it starts with the miracle of Jesus feeding the 5000 – he gives them bread to eat; and then it moves into Jesus talking to the crowds and religious leaders and disciples about a different kind of bread – about spiritual sustenance. ‘I am the bread of life’ Jesus says, ‘I am the bread that comes down from heaven’, ‘I am the bread of life’ he says again – and just in case there is any

doubt, 'I am the living bread' Jesus says. Jesus is anything but subtle – he drives home the image and the point again and again – he is the source of true life given from God; it is literally his person – his body – to eat his body and blood; Jesus is very graphic about it – 'eat my flesh and live', Jesus says. And although Jesus is quite popular when he provides bread for everyone – all the talk of living bread and life found only in eating Jesus' body – that is not so popular. We hear today that the image is not particularly appealing or practical – 'how can he give us his flesh to eat?' is the response; and even more than that, we'll find out as this section concludes next week that people are disturbed and offended – they find it a difficult teaching, and many people turn away from following Jesus – his popularity plummets.

Why is that? What is there in Jesus' words to disturb and offend? Well, I think it is not so much the image itself – it is the total dependency on God, on Jesus himself, that Jesus reveals and demands here. As graphic as Jesus is in speaking of his body and blood, that's still an image he is presenting – that one could handle; but what Jesus is getting at with this image, is that he is the source of life itself – Jesus puts it very bluntly - 'without me, you have no life.'

Such talk does not sit well with our modern sensibilities – not with modern people then or now – to talk of such total dependence and need. Certainly that applies to people who reject faith altogether – as one woman in NYC shared with our group, how in her family faith in God is basically seen as intellectual failure. But it also applies to people of faith – faith in God is good, but we prefer some kind of partnership model...God helping us out, yes; but we are capable and resourceful people as well, who can help ourselves and others – that's how God has made us, right? Such talk of total dependence on God doesn't seem fitting for us. Or people of faith are also fond of various back up plans: faith yes, but our own works and accomplishments too to save us – faith yes, but our own possessions, defenses, privileges to make us feel secure as well.

Which is why what I have heard in Jesus' words this week is the echoes of the 1st step – the 1st step that is needed for everyone: to admit you are powerless over the brokenness of your life, and that you cannot manage it on your own...that's what Jesus is saying – you can't do this life thing, can't find life on your own – you are dependent – you are in need – and you need to admit it. And the thing about the 1st step in the recovery program, is that it leads to the 2nd step – imagine that! – the 2nd step, which is basically this: 'to have faith in God who can restore and heal' – or another way to say it – Jesus said 'I am the bread of life' – and then the 3rd step – 'turn my will, my life to the care of God' – or as Jesus said: 'eat my flesh and abide in me.'

Sometimes a place like Holland, Mecca of the Reformed church – bedrock of Midwest Protestant orthodoxy – home of many churches...presents itself, sees itself,

as being pretty high on the faith scale – a place that is quite secure, quite proud of itself in that regard; ...when in fact what we in Holland, we at Hope Church included, are really high on is our own perceived capability to manage life – to fix things – to be in control. We see ourselves as pretty far along the spiritual journey and high on the faith ladder; when in fact what our brothers and sisters in the recovery movement teach us is needed this day and each day is to take the 1st step – to bring our broken lives before ourselves and say we cannot fix them; and so then to turn to a God who can. Because the stories we heard at Greenpoint were not stories about drinking and drugs and feeling sorry for ‘those people’ so much lower than us - they were stories of faith and God’s miraculous healing presence and power – which are the stories of their lives and of ours when we take the 1st step together – and the storyline for life that Jesus offers to all.

When you’re on a youth group trip, you develop little jokes that you share together – and they seem fun to us, and I hope as I share this that it seems so to you too...! But one of the things I was doing through the week was ending lots of phrases with ‘of life’ – the mission trip of life, the group of life, the bagels of life, the Gretchen of life, the Gatorade of life – and after a day of intensive cleaning of bathrooms, there was even the toilet of life and the urinal of life! It was just kind of fun – but I also shared with the kids that saying ‘...of life’ is something I do because it points to things that are life-giving and good in the midst of the everyday – the people and experiences you encounter. And we also realized as we shared communion together at the end of our week in NYC, that it pointed us to connect to the image of Jesus as the Bread of Life – the one from whom all true life comes.

What our group learned there, was renewed in, we share with you – that here is the 1st step for us to take – for Holland – for Hope Church – the 1st step is to come to this table to receive the bread of life. It is a step we take not to judge others, but to witness to the need we share with all – that our broken lives cannot be mended on our own – that we turn to a God of power and grace who can – the Bread of Life that nourishes with healing and hope. *Hope Church – helping Holland to take the 1st step* – or as we might say in High Hopes - the 1st step of life. AMEN.