

Sermon by Wade Schemmel for June 7, 2009

Annual Meeting Sunday

Northern Plains Conference United Church of Christ

“A Wild and Radical Believing” John 6:25 – 35

The famous baseball player and coach, Yogi Berra once said, “When you come to a fork in the road, take it!” While this is an interesting bit of advice, there are several reasons why it is not easy to follow. No matter which way you go when you reach the fork in the road you will be changing direction. You will be making a change. And change is not easy to do. It is very difficult. In fact much of our life is lived trying to avoid change. We do all sorts of things to try to avoid the impact of making a change. We will do almost anything to avoid making a change. History has told us that the two most difficult things for a congregation to do are choosing a new hymnal or redesigning the front of the sanctuary. Congregations will stay with old hymnals that have outdated imagery and language rather than go through making a change to a new hymnal. Congregations would rather stay with a chancel area that does not work for them than make the changes necessary. Change is very difficult. The closer the change is to our personal lives the more difficult it is for us to make. The problem is if we want to speak our message to future generations in a way that they will understand and receive it we need to change the way we present that message.

In John chapter 6:25 – 35 we meet some folk who are searching for a way to move into a new world. They are people who understand that their lives are not all they could be and that there is a better world out there. The issue that focused their concerns may have been the quality of their life, or the amount of food they were able to find for themselves and their families, or the lack of security with which they lived each day. The reality is that they were not content with their lives. When along came an itinerant preacher who caught their imagination. It was an exciting preacher whose message they found to be inspiring, a preacher whom they followed. Who knows what event from the life of Jesus actually got their attention, possibly they were at the wedding in Cana when Jesus turned the water into wine, or possibly they saw him heal a sick man by the pool or maybe they were in the crowd when Jesus fed the 5000. Who knows? Eventually they were convinced that this carpenter from Nazareth turned preacher had a vision of life unlike any that they had heard before. His message was not like the

others. This Jesus was not as concerned about following rules as he was about sharing hope. The God of which he spoke was not angry and vengeful but loving. The future to which he looked was not futile and lost but hope filled and promising. The people came searching for the means to do as Jesus did. For the means to speak Jesus' message. Jesus invited them to look to the God that had been with them in the wilderness, that they might find in that God the hope and the strength to face tomorrow. Jesus invited them to look through him to the God of Creation, that they might find the spiritual nourishment to face a changing tomorrow. Jesus assured these followers that they need not walk into the future alone for that God that had walked with them in the past would be with them in the days that lay ahead.

The events of the past few years have driven home the message that we are in need of change. There are fears arising from the recession, anxieties about two wars, concern about the signs of climate change, angers over wage disparities and many more factors that confirm our suspicion that life is changing. We are standing on the cusp of a future we really do not comprehend and possibly do to want. A future that is calling us to look at our world and everything that is in it differently. We are standing on the very edge of change. We are entering the era of transformation. This is an era when the role of our faith becomes that of being the vision that walks with us through the wilderness that lies ahead. It is a vision that helps us to understand the future to which God would guide us. We cannot continue to do as we have done and expect to get anything other than what we already have. The challenge facing the church today is not to make society feel good. It is not to fit into the fabric of the day, but rather to point to a new day. The status quo is not good enough. In fact it is not healthy. We must embrace a new vision of God's tomorrow that will give us a new model of how we relate to our neighbor, our Mother Earth and our Creator. It is time for a wild and radical believing. A believing that calls us to embrace God's vision as we go beyond the walls of our fear and greed, that we might follow the path God embraces for all life. We are talking about a resurrection faith. We are in a world embracing faith. We are not merely talking about having faith in Jesus, but in finding the single minded, clearly focused faith of Jesus. We need to follow Jesus understanding until we can make it our own.

This is not an easy thing to do. In fact it is anything but. It is a time of endings and new beginnings. We need to end the belief that the world is ours to consume at will, regardless of the damage it does to God's creation and the penalty it inflicts on future generations. We need to end the blind eye that we turn to the poor and the marginalized, for God asks all of us the question God asked Cain of the creation story, "How is it with your Brother (Sister)", for it was God's understanding that Cain was his brother's keeper. That has not changed. We need to end the reliance we have on our fears to be the motivating forces towards our future. For indeed it is our faith and not our fears that needs to point us to tomorrow. We need to respond to our world as

God's servants who embrace tomorrow with the same Resurrection Spirit we discovered on Easter. We need to remember that Jesus does not call us to be armed with ideology but to be infused with imagination. Let us dream the holy dream and not lose faith that it can happen. Our task as a servant of God is not to make the holy vision fit the world but to work that the holy vision might change the world. Change need not be an accident of nature or a mistake of history. It may well be the touch of a Creative God. In Genesis we read that God created six times and then rested, modeling our need to take time for rest and renewal. But God did not retire. We are living the 8th day of creation, when God's Continued Creative Spirit calls us forward that with a wild and radical believing we might step ever closer to the fullness of God's holy vision for all of us.

Therefore, may we celebrate the joy of bold discipleship. May we rejoice in the ways of God's grace for all. May we live into the new day of God's creation.