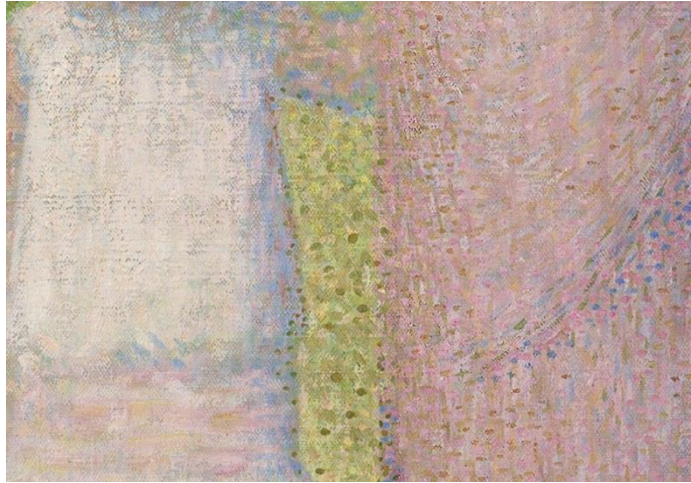


Bread of Life

August 1, 2021

The Rev. David Gaeth

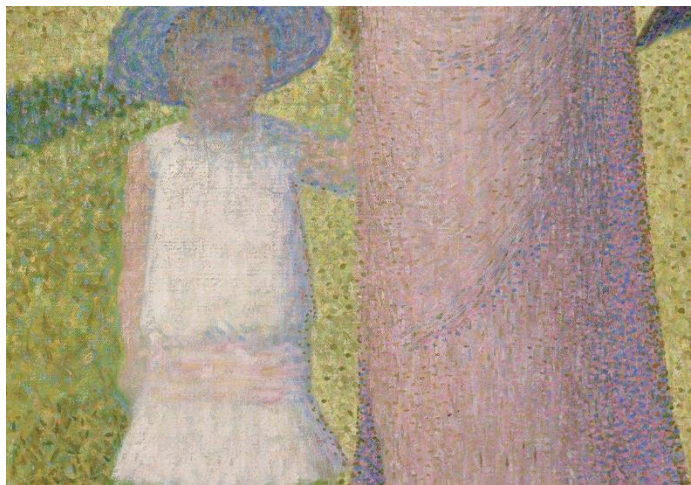
So, on the second floor of The Chicago Art Institute, in Gallery 240, there hangs one of my favorite paintings in the world. It looks like this.



Do you recognize it? Do you recognize this picture at all, from Gallery 240 in the Chicago Art Institute?

I love the dapples of olive green and celery green and yellows as they almost dance together on the canvas. They create a striking juxtaposition to the shadowed linen white on the left and the ashes of roses flecked with vermillion blue and dots of gray.

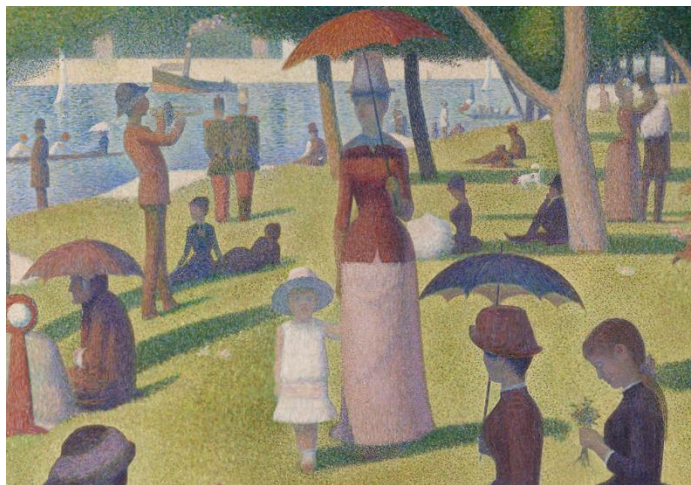
I can tell from the looks on your faces that y'all are not as enamored with this painting as I am. Well, how 'bout now?



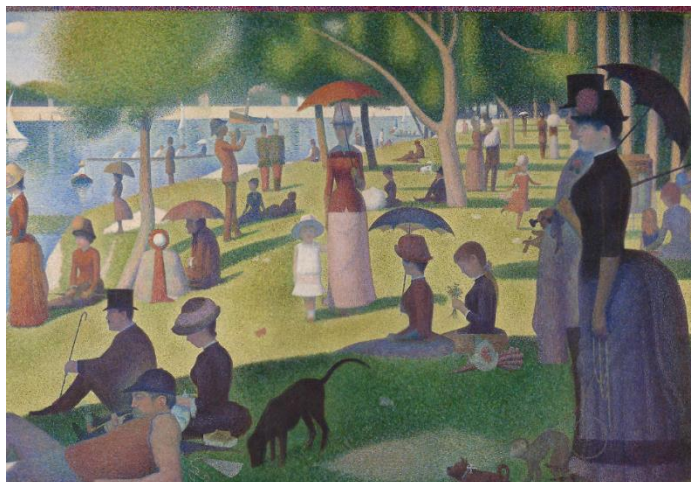
Is that better? Ah, you didn't tell us, Pastor Dave, that this was part of a bigger painting. How 'bout now?



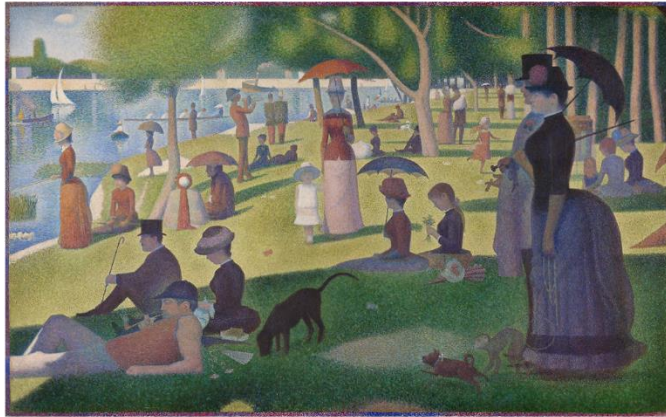
And now?



And, now?



Ah, and, now?



Now you see it full on. It is the masterpiece “An Afternoon on the Isle of La Grand Jatte” painted by George Seurat, a painting composed of millions of dots and dapples, each painstakingly placed on the canvas over a three-year period of time by the artist.

Every time I go to Gallery 240, I assume different positions in the viewing area – the far right corner, the far left corner, as far back as I can go, even across the hall into the doorway of another gallery when I am as far away as possible. And each time I see something new, something exciting, and I wonder what about the story behind the painting. Like, why on earth did Seurat make the monkey transparent? It’s true. You can see right through it. Why is the boat sinking in the River Seine? Like, why aren’t there any bathers on the other side of the river where the beach is – why are they all crowded on this one side? I believe Seurat wanted us to play with this picture in our minds. This is the job of a good storyteller, a good artist.

Today’s lesson from the Gospel of John is the beginning of a very long section devoted to the topic of bread – starting at verse 22 and going through verse 66. That’s 44 verses devoted to the bread of life. The next longest teaching segment in the Gospels is the parable of the prodigal in Luke’s Gospel which is only 21 verses long.

Jesus is trying to invite the crowd to see the juxtaposition of what they have experienced to what they could experience. “You had bread that fed you once, but you could have something bigger which will sustain you for time transcendent.” In the story before today’s lesson, Jesus fed the multitudes on the other side of the Sea of Genessaret in Syria.

By the way – did you ever notice that the central stories of our faith are not located in Israel – that place, that country, that we call the Holy Land? They don’t take place there. They take place in other countries. The feeding of the multitudes from last week took place in Syria. Abraham and Sarah receive their call to journey in Iraq. Queen Esther takes place in Iran. And Ruth, the grandmother of King David, is from Jordan. (These are the things that interrupt pastor’s sleep, by the way.)

Jesus is saying, “You have had this (shows first picture), but you could have this (shows full picture). You can know a part of me that was revealed in the feeding of the multitude, or you could experience the more of me by experiencing the all of my life.”

And I’m going to let Brittany finish.

The Rev. Brittany Barber

The key word there was ‘let.’

Whenever Dave mentioned this painting to me, I was – yes – I was one of those fourth-grade girls who was enamored with the Impressionists. Okay, my artistic taste has evolved since then. But, yes, I was familiar with the picture and I thought, isn’t it interesting that he’s picking this picture that is kind of like an enormous picnic and that’s what happened last week in the text.

And this week as Dave was talking about, you would think that that moment – feeding 5,000 people – would have stayed with them a little bit longer than six days. But, no. They really want another sign right now.

One might kind of wonder how they had the chutzpah to ask Jesus to do this just after he miraculously fed the crowds. Dare they imply to God that their work will only be done when Jesus performs a sign for each of them personally? Jesus explains, but the crowd – the people – they don’t understand the sign that has already been placed in front of them, over and over again.

Jesus links this miracle of feeding the crowds to the manna story which we all know so well. But in our portion today, he notes that the donor of that bread – that manna – was not Moses; it was God. The second thing that Jesus notes about the manna is that the gift of the bread occurs in the present (right now), not in some 2,000-year-old story that has been brought down through the generations. Jesus also speaks of the “true bread from heaven.” And lastly, he tells the crowd that they, and not their ancestors, are the recipients of God’s gift of the “true bread of heaven.”

It just occurred to me. Don’t we always do this? You know, in our revisionist history that we tell ourselves. You know, “Oh, our family was so much more Christian a hundred years ago, blah, blah, blah.” Guess what, folks? They’re not here anymore. The bread of life was given for you. All of you in your amazing uniqueness and splendor.

So, Jesus describes the “bread of God” with two clauses following that word: 1) it “comes down from heaven,” and 2) it “gives life to the world.” Both of these modifiers have already been used in the Gospel according to John to describe Jesus. Jesus comes down from heaven to give life to the world.

As John Petty put it in his blog *Progressive Involvement*:

“In this section of the fourth gospel, the food of God is contrasted with the food of old, or, to put it a different way, God’s nourishment is being

defined in a new way [That sacred recipe from Great Grandma Abigail has changed through the generations. They didn't have Jell-O in 1855. Thank God! Yes. Thank God! Although I enjoyed some Jell-O fluff yesterday. I'm sure it will be with me in my cells forever. So, this is coming in a new way to us.] – not the old bread of life which fed some, but the new bread of life who feeds all.”

And the implication that we have now – 2,000 years later – is not just those people on that hillside, not just the people in the painting, but each and every one of us here today.

So, just as Jesus took that earlier scripture and adapted it from that day in our scripture here in John, we also are called to bring something new to worship. And here I need all of us – myself included – to listen carefully, as Jesus asks us today to remember the manna in the wilderness and Jesus' feeding of the crowds. And he asks us to not only remember, but to realize that God is still feeding us, that God gives us bread just as God gave the Israelites manna and the followers of Jesus are getting both physical bread and spiritual bread in his body and in his teaching. God gives us the bread which gives life to the world.

As Symeon the Theologian wrote around the year 1000 AD:

*...and everything that is hurt,
everything that seemed to us dark, harsh, shameful, maimed, ugly,
irreparably damaged is in Him [Jesus] transformed
and recognized as whole, as lovely, and radiant in His light
we awaken as the Beloved in every last part of our body.*

When this congregation – when the church written large – hands on their gift to Josie and to all the other little ones here, let us remember we're not handing on that which is hurt and harsh and shameful and ugly. We've had enough of that, folks. Let's promise ourselves it's over today. And instead, let's give them our transformed selves and help them transform themselves through the power of Jesus to become whole and lovely and radiant because Jesus' light has awakened in them the beloved. They are beloved. We are beloved. Every bit of us, every last part of our body is beloved.

So, Jesus is our Bread of Life today. In him we know that: *Whoever comes to me [Jesus] will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me [Jesus] will never be thirsty.* Because He is the Living Bread sent by God to feed the world, then and today.

Revs. David Gaeth and Brittany Barber
Union Congregational United Church of Christ
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