

“Spiraling Upwards”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts
August 4, 2024 - Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

[2 Samuel 11:26-12:13a; John 6:24-35](#)

I remember well the first time I was called Weird Al. It happened one day when I was 18 and in my freshman year of college as I was riding my bike to school. I was just riding away on the side of the road when the driver of a car that was passing rolled down his window and yelled, “Hey, it’s Weird Al!” Now, I did at the time share some of the distinctive physical characteristics of Alfred Matthew Yankovic, better known as Weird Al, the accordion-playing, parody song-performing superstar, who produced such hits as “Eat It” over the music of Michael Jackson’s “Beat It” and, to the tune of the Knack’s 1979 hit “My Sharona,” gave us “My Bologna.” At the time, both Weird Al and I did have long, curly brown hair in something of a mullet hairdo; fairly thick, wire-framed glasses; and scraggly, little moustaches, so there was definitely a resemblance, especially to a quickly-glancing driver of a passing car, *and many others*. It didn’t help that as I grew my hair out longer and ditched the mullet, so did Weird Al; and as I gave up the mustachioed look, so did Weird Al; and when I traded in my glasses for contacts, so did Weird Al. So, yes, for several years, I looked a lot like Weird Al, and people, friends and strangers alike, seemed eager to tell me so.

Has anyone ever told you that you look like some famous person (and hopefully not some infamous person)? Maybe because of the style of your hair or shape of your face or look of your smile?

If so, you’re in good company, for this happened to Jesus as well. Today, in our gospel lesson, we read one of the many stories we have about Jesus being mistakenly identified as someone else; not because of his looks, however, but because of his actions and his words. In the lesson, we find Jesus on the other side of the sea of Galilee from where he miraculously fed great crowds just the day before, and we also find that the great crowds were out searching for him and found him there, demanding yet another sign from him that his words and work were from God and seeking still to make him their king. When Jesus tells the crowd that his mission was to give people the bread of heaven, they mistake him for one who would always give physical bread and meet their material needs,

and so they beg for Jesus to fill their bellies again and always. But Jesus told them that what he had to offer was not something that would satisfy their hungry bellies, but their starving spirits, that he himself was the bread of life, and those who trust and follow him would have their deepest *spiritual* longings satisfied.

This wasn't the first time in the gospel of John that we find Jesus' mission to satisfy people's hunger and thirst being misunderstood. Earlier in the gospel, Jesus met with a woman at a well in Samaria and told her that he offered living water, which she initially misunderstood as meaning he would give her an unending supply of potable water to drink. Also, he was misunderstood by a man named Nicodemus when Jesus told him that he must be born again, he was perplexed by the statement as he was thinking only of physical birth. Jesus being misunderstood as he used physical symbols and signs to point to deeper spiritual truths is a motif that recurs throughout the gospel of John; but each time, Jesus teaches about his true identity as the Messiah who would save people not by continually satisfying their physical needs as God had enabled Moses to do for the Israelites in the wilderness, and not by physically subduing their foes and establishing a kingly reign like the very flawed David, but in giving them what was needed for their souls to be made whole and for them to find spiritual life in abundance, no matter their physical circumstances.

When we celebrate the sacrament of communion and take in the bread that reminds us of the life of Jesus that was given for us, we are reminded that he is the bread of life, that his life feeds and fills our spirits, giving us what we need to live as his body in the world. With our spirits fed and our bodies in action, doing the work of Christ and offering the words of Christ, I hope that people would see enough of Jesus' characteristics in us that they mistake us for him.

And as we live out our faith as the body of Christ in the world, let us never fall into the trap of thinking that God's desire for this body is for it to be physically prosperous, endowed with material riches, and growing in monetary wealth and power. Unfortunately, this message will be heard coming from many pulpits throughout our nation this morning, but let us remember here that Christ's blessing upon us is a spiritual blessing, and if we seek it in material things, we turn Jesus, the Savior of our spirits, into some material messiah that he is not and never was.

Rather, let us remember that Christ came to give us what we need for our spirits to be nourished, that they may rise and soar. In this world, in which humanity's violence of leads us downward to more and worse acts of violence, let us work to break this downward cycle by having life-filled spirits and spirit-filled lives that are lifted up from the dirt and that lift others as well. As we come to Christ, trust in him, are nourished by him, and continue his way of selfless love in this world, may we move upwards, generating cycles of love that inspire greater acts of love. Spiraling upwards, may people see Christ in us and come along for the blessed, life-filled journey. Amen.