

I sometimes wonder how I would react to Jesus, if I were walking with him in Jerusalem 2000 years ago.

Jesus seems to like to keep his followers on edge ... on their toes.  
Why do you think Jesus likes to keep us off-balance?

How do you feel about surprises? Jesus' comments seem to be full of surprises.

Are you wild about surprises? Or, do you for the most part, like the predictable, the planned, the ordered.

Surprises, good or bad, have this way of upsetting plans and catching you off guard, of making you feel all unsettled and unprepared and insecure.

Now, don't get me wrong, surprises in some areas of life are fine, even fun.

Most people are well-intentioned when they plan their surprises, so you really can't get too mad at them, can you?

With this in mind, I wonder just how I would have taken to Jesus, as he seems, particularly in John's Gospel, to **delight in surprising people**.

Today's reading points that out. Jesus comes and encounters a crowd and surprises them with what he says.

It started last week, with the miraculous feeding of five thousand with merely five loaves and two fish. "Surprise, disciples. We're going to feed these people with what we have here."

Which, when you think of it, isn't too bad of a way to be surprised: to get a free and unexpected dinner when you're hungry. But, as we noticed last week, right after the miracle Jesus vanishes, leaving them behind feeling rather confused and disappointed. And so they follow, finding him, eventually, on the other side of the lake, which we heard in this week's Bible reading.

From here on out, things only get worse. First, Jesus accuses them of opportunism: "Ah, you're only here because you want another free meal," he scolds. And, truth be told, he was probably right. But Jesus isn't content with being merely right, and so to rub it in a bit he goes on with his lecture: "Do not work for the food that spoils," he persists, "instead, work for the food that lasts for eternal life."



Well, that gets their attention. “Okay,” the crowd says, “we’ll go with you on this one, what kind of work do we have to do to get this food?”

“**Just believe,**” Jesus says, “just believe that I am **the One** God sent.” At this point the crowd balks, wondering just who in the world this guy thinks he is.

What Jesus is offering? He is holding out the shiny apple, the first prize: he’s offering the bread of life – the food of myth and legend, the nectar of the gods, the stuff which grants life eternal.

And, they are surprised, and who wouldn’t be?

This, in a nutshell, is what is so hard about the gospel and the sacraments. The presence of God in them is surprising. They come into our lives, disrupting the neat order we’ve arranged, and surprise us, even shock us, by **making audacious promises of life and wholeness.**

That’s hard. For on a day-to-day basis, most of us have gotten pretty good at defending ourselves from the pain and frustration and hurt and despair of life in this world.

And then these promises of God are announced to us and they only betray the foolishness of our *self-reliance* and at the same time promise us more than we could have ever hoped for.

God says, “Trust me.”

I mean think about it: at Baptism we pour water over an infant’s head and announce to her God’s promise to be with her forever, to go with her wherever she may go, to hold on to her through all that life has to offer – including even death – and to grant her life eternal. My word, but that’s some promise.

And exactly the same happens in the Lord’s Supper. For each time you come to the Table you are promised nothing less than forgiveness, acceptance, wholeness: in a word, life, both now and forever.

Surprise: God is with you.



*A fellow was stuck on his rooftop in a flood. He was praying to God for help.*

*Soon a man in a rowboat came by and the fellow shouted to the man on the roof, "Jump in, I can save you."*

*The stranded fellow shouted back, "No, it's OK, I'm praying to God and he is going to save me."*

*So the rowboat went on.*

*Then a motorboat came by. "The fellow in the motorboat shouted, "Jump in, I can save you."*

*To this the stranded man said, "No thanks, I'm praying to God and he is going to save me. I have faith."*

*So the motorboat went on.*

*Then a helicopter came by and the pilot shouted down, "Grab this rope and I will lift you to safety."*

*To this the stranded man again replied, "No thanks, I'm praying to God and he is going to save me. I have faith."*

*So the helicopter reluctantly flew away.*

*Soon the water rose above the rooftop and the man drowned. He went to Heaven. He finally got his chance to discuss this whole situation with God, at which point he exclaimed, "I had faith in you but you didn't save me, you let me drown. I don't understand why!"*

*To this God replied, "I sent you a rowboat and a motorboat and a helicopter, what more did you expect?"*

What do you expect from Baptism? What do you expect from Communion? You should expect God ... for God is present.

**(Visible words)** This, you see, is the sacraments. Communion and baptism are God's external and objective words of love and forgiveness, given in a form which we can receive, for, as we said last week, the sacraments are God's physical, visible words for God's physical, visible people.



And the thing is, just as with Jesus' words to the crowd, such a promise is as frightening as it is comforting, for such a promise raises hopes and expectations to dizzying heights.

John reports that the people naturally ask, "what miracle will you perform so that we may see it and believe you?" In other words, "Prove yourself, Jesus." And my, but doesn't that sound familiar, for how much easier faith would be if God would just do what God's supposed to do and give us a miracle. Do we expect Jesus to prove himself ... in our life?

We expect God on our terms.

But God rarely does what we think God is supposed to do. He does not always perform as we expect.

Our God is a God of surprises, of upheavals, of reversals. And so rather than do what God is supposed to do, God does the unexpected:

- instead of pronouncing judgment in the face of our sin and selfishness, God offers mercy;
- instead of justice, love;
- instead of condemnation, forgiveness;
- instead of coming in power, God came in weakness; and
- instead of giving us a miracle, God gives us God's own self.

For as Martin Luther would remind us, the whole of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection are summed up both succinctly and eloquently in the two words we hear when coming to the Table: "for you." *This is Christ's body, given for you. This is Christ's blood, shed for you.*

This is the heart of our faith (our trust), the faith we are privileged to proclaim: that the Eternal Word who was with God and is God from the beginning and participated in the creation of the heavens and the earth is the same Lord who cares so desperately for us that he gave his life for ours on the cross and He still gives himself to us in the bread and wine. Today. August 5, 2018.

Perhaps this, in the end, is the hardest thing of all for us to accept about the sacraments: that they contain God's unexpected, surprising, unforeseen gift of God's own self.

Expect the gift. This gift of surprising and disarming love here ... at this Table.



God's promise comes to us again just as it did when as helpless babes we were brought to the Font.

So, have a slice of the Bread of Life.

Come and receive the surprise of your life. For those who comes to Christ will never be hungry, and those who believe in Christ will not thirst.

