

Michael Gehring
“Audacious Claims”
John 6: 35, 41-51
Main Street UMC
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Do you remember that movie *Catch Me If You Can* about Frank Abagnale who, before turning 19, stole millions of dollars cashing fake checks while posing as a Pan Am pilot, a lawyer, and a doctor? It was based on a true story. At first, you're somewhat incredulous that someone, especially someone under the age of 19 could pull that off, but you know history is replete with stories of people who pretended to be someone that they are not.

In 1817, a woman took the village of Almondsbury, England by storm claiming that she was an island princess. She asserted that she was kidnapped by pirates and escaped by swimming the Bristol Channel. She wore a black turban, spoke a mysterious language, and enamored the denizens by swimming in her birthday suit at a nearby lake. Time passed, and the fraud was uncovered. She was not a Princess but Mary Baker, a citizen not of some far away island but of England, who had previously worked as a domestic servant. (www.history.com/news/7-people-who-pretended-to-be-royals)

In the early 1920's a woman who was a resident of the Berlin Mental Asylum proclaimed that she was really the Grand Duchess Anastasia, the youngest daughter of the deceased Russian Czar Nicholas II. Even though she was a resident of a mental institution, there were a lot of wealthy Russian emigrants who rallied to her side. Time passed, and a DNA test proved that she was not a princess but just ordinary Anna Anderson.

Why do some people pretend to be something that they are not? I don't know, but it happens. Some years ago, I was serving another church and a man made an appointment to see me. He sat in my office and was a lovely conversationalist. He had heard through the grapevine that I admire poets and writers. He introduced himself as a poet and regaled me with stories of being friends with Tennessee Williams. He spun all kinds of stories about how they would hang out together in New Orleans. He also told me of all the other writer friends of his and their time in Europe. He painted a wonderful picture of his writer's life sounding almost like Hemingway in the 1920's in Paris hanging out with Ezra Pound and Gertrude Stein. As a token of our friendship, he gave me a poem autographed by Tennessee Williams. One day I'm passing through the church office and I see him running of multiple copies of that same poem and I'm sure he took them home and signed them all Tennessee Williams.

Why do people pretend to be who they are not? I don't know but it happens and it pays not to be too gullible when people are making audacious claims. In fact, I believe it's a sound policy. That's why I have such sympathy with the Jewish religious leaders.

In the Scripture passage read this morning, we find the Jewish religious leaders struggling. Jesus said, ***"I am the bread of life that came down from heaven."*** The back-story that you need to know is that in the 1st century you were taught in your religious instruction the Shema (Deuteronomy 6:4) ***"Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone."*** Another way of saying is it ***the Lord our God is one***. They had also been taught that the reason why they are a conquered people, conquered by the Babylonians, the Greeks, and the Romans is that their ancestors forgot who they were and whose they were and they worshipped false gods. You could even say if you wanted to push the boundaries theologically is that they were set up culturally, historically, and religiously to reject Jesus. Jesus' words to their ears sound a whole lot like blasphemy. No wonder they weren't happy. I dare say that if you and I were first-century Jews, we too would be in that crowd unhappy with Jesus. Even a fair reading of this has got to admit that Jesus is making some audacious claims. ***"I am the bread of Life that has come down from heaven."*** ***"I am the way, the truth, and the life."*** ***"I am the light of the world."*** ***"I am the resurrection and the life."*** This is not easy stuff now and it certainly wasn't easy to grasp in the 1st century. What are we to make of this?

As Christians, we believe in special revelation which means we believe that God revealed himself in a special way to Abraham, to Moses, to the prophets, and that the fullest revelation came in the person of Jesus. And so here we are back at the text and Jesus is making these audacious claims, ***"I am the bread of life, I am the vine, and I am the Lord of the Resurrection."*** What are to make of these claims? I believe C.S. Lewis's trilemma does a really nice job apologetically of forcing this issue upon us.

Who do we say that Jesus is? Lewis argued you can't call Jesus just a good teacher of morality because a good teacher of morality wouldn't make claims about himself that aren't true. To say the Father and I are one, to say that I am the Lord of the Resurrection are not the statements made by a good teacher if they are not true. If the statements are not true then they are the utterances of a lunatic or a liar. Lewis said that if we believe that the statements Jesus made are true, then all we can do is to fall on our knees and call him Lord. And if we recognize him as Lord, then all we can do is submit, submit to his claims upon our lives, and to follow him the best that we can do.

One time, when I was 20 years old backpacking across Europe, I was on a train bound for somewhere, but I forget after all these years where. In my hands was Dietrich Bonhoeffer's book, ***The Cost of Discipleship***. You remember

Bonhoeffer was one of the Flossenbergr martyrs. He wrote the book in 1937. He lived the book when he was arrested April 5, 1943. He was executed by the Nazis April 9, 1945, tragically just a few days before the camp was liberated by the Allied armies.

I'm on this train and it's the summer of 1982. In the train car, sitting across from me was this old priest. When he saw the book I was holding, his face lit up. He spoke no English and I spoke no German but we managed to learn a little bit about each other with the few words we each knew in the other's language and a nearby woman who knew some broken English. I learned that during the Second World War he was taken a prisoner by the Russians and held in this brutal concentration camp. I could tell that Bonhoeffer's thought, theology, and life meant the world to him because he too lived it. It was an incredible holy moment. Two people, one old and one young, a German and an American, spell bound by the vision of a Lutheran pastor theologian who wrote, "***When Christ calls a man, he bids him to come and die.***"

We're not all called to be martyrs, in the most literal sense of the word, but we're all called to follow Christ. And there are people in this room who have sacrificed a great deal to follow Jesus. And there may be people in here today struggling with whether to follow Jesus or not. And if you are, I want you to know he is who he says he is; he is the Lord of the Resurrection and in him we all live.