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Sermons

from The Church of the Covenant

“Investing”

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John 6:24-35

24 So when the crowd saw that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they themselves got into the boats and went to Capernaum looking for Jesus. 25 When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, "Rabbi, when did you come here?" 26 Jesus answered them, "Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. 27 Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal." 28 Then they said to him, "What must we do to perform the works of God?" 29 Jesus answered them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent." 30 So they said to him, "What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing? 31 Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, "He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'" 32 Then Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. 33 For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." 34 They said to him, "Sir, give us this bread always." 35 Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

“Investing” **John 6:34-35**

Marina Picciotto is a professor of psychology and neurobiology at Yale. In a recent speech she talked about the neurobiological view of happiness. Her research has revealed that when we experience an unexpected reward — like tasting chocolate for the first time — we get a rush of dopamine, that feel-good hormone. That good feeling caused by dopamine makes us want to repeat the experience. But once we’ve created an expectation around that experience — once we expect chocolate to taste good and make us feel good — then the rush of dopamine actually comes *before* we get the chocolate. It might come when we see the package of chocolate or when we decide that we are going to break off a piece and put it in our mouths. Then, as long as the chocolate tastes how we expect it to, our expectation is matched by reality. When this happens, we experience, not another rush of dopamine, but a feeling of contentment and calm that we call happiness. It is *this* feeling that we continually seek.¹

The passage we just heard from the gospel of John picks up not long after Jesus miraculously feeds a crowd of thousands with just five loaves of bread and two fish. Something unusual happened that day, and it wasn't just that those meager supplies were enough to give each person some food — it was that everyone there ate until they were *satisfied*. These people lived in a food-insecure culture. They rarely ate until their bellies were full, and the experience left them wanting *more*.

No wonder then, that when the feeling past and the old familiar hunger returned, they went looking for Jesus.

Today’s story picks up when they find him. Jesus knows exactly what they want.

“You’re looking for me,” he says, “because you ate your fill of that bread I gave you, and now you want more.”

Jesus knows that the people who had satisfied themselves with the bread and fish he gave them are hard-wired to repeat that experience. He knows that they have come after him in search of the post-dopamine calm we call happiness.

But Jesus refuses to meet their expectations. He refuses to repeat the miracle. He refuses to simply give them more bread.

Instead he offers some advice:

“Do not work for perishable food,” he tells them, “work for the food that endures forever.”

¹ from a speech Picciotto gave at the Chautauqua Institution on July 25, 2013.

It may not make much sense to the people at first, especially when their stomachs are empty again and the longing for *more* of what he gave them is more intense with each passing moment.

But Jesus wants more for them too and so he offers them the chance not just to *receive* from him, but to work *with* him. “Do not work for perishable food. Work for the food that endures forever.”

And even though they don’t really understand what he’s talking about, they jump at the chance, immediately asking: “What is this work? How can we be a part of it?”

Recently, I started listening to a new podcast called *Startup*. It’s produced by Alex Blumberg, who is kind of famous in the podcasting world because of his work on *This American Life* and *Planet Money*. *Startup* is the story of Alex’s attempt to start a business. He’s hoping to create a podcasting network — basically a broadcast network like NBC or ABC, but instead of television shows, his network would create and distribute original podcasts.

Like Alex’s other work, *Startup* is smart and entertaining. It is also painfully revealing. Alex lets his listeners hear his first awkward pitches to venture capitalists, whose investments are vital to his ability to launch and sustain his business. When he brings on a business partner, we get to hear the awkward negotiation about how they will split equity in the company. Alex even lets us listen in on conversations between him and his wife, who is by turns supportive and skeptical about this endeavor.²

After just a few episodes I was already emotionally invested in *Startup*. I eagerly awaited each new episode and found myself wanting more and more for Alex’s business to succeed. And then I found myself wondering: could I invest financially in Alex’s business? Now, to be clear, I’m no venture capitalist, but based on the challenge Alex was facing raising money, I assumed that every dollar would help his cause.

So I visited the *Startup* website. I scoured it for a “donate” link, but there was none. There was a “contact” link, however, and I for a moment I actually considered sending an email, *asking* if I could please make a donation to the *Startup* cause.

The people who sought Jesus out after the miracle of the loaves and fishes want to be in on what he’s doing. They want to get involved. They want to invest, if not financially, then with their lives. “What is this work? How can we be a part of it?”

Jesus’ answer is deceptively simple: “Believe in me.”

What Jesus is talking about when he says “believe in me” is not the intellectual exercise we often associate with belief. Especially in John’s gospel, where Jesus talks a lot about belief,

² hearstartup.com

we need to understand that this is no intellectual endeavor, it is *relational*. On his last night with his disciples in this gospel, Jesus says to them, “the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these.”

Believing in Jesus, being in relationship with him means we are called to do more than just receive all that he offers us. We are called *to do what he did*. We are called to *get involved*. We are called to invest, not just with our money, but with our lives. We are called, both as individuals and as a church, to feed people, heal people, respond with compassion to people in need. We are called to show hospitality and extend forgiveness, to see each person as a beloved child of God and to treat them as such.

If belief was just an intellectual exercise or even just a financial transaction; if we could just write a check to the church and gain all the benefits of being part of this community, it would be a whole lot easier than this call to *relationship*. But true relationship is exactly what Jesus asks of us.

From a young age, I was taught the importance of giving money to the church, and it is a practice I’ve maintained most of my life. But when I pulled up the contact form on the *Startup* website and thought seriously about sending an email, it suddenly occurred to me: I’ve never about giving to the church the way I’ve been feeling these last few weeks about giving to *Startup*. Energized. Excited. *Disappointed* when I couldn’t find an easy way to give. Willing to reach out to a total stranger and ask what sounds like a crazy question: can I please give you some money?

When I told a friend about my revelation regarding *Startup* — how I had never been as excited to give the church as I felt to give to Alex Blumberg’s new company, and what was that, and what did that mean? My friend laughed and said, “You know why you’re excited to give to that company, don’t you?”

“Because I really believe in what he’s trying to do.”

“That’s not why,” she responded. “You’re excited because if the company does as well as you think it will, you could make money too.”

As much as I hate to admit it, I immediately realized she was right. Yes, I love the idea of this podcasting company. I love it enough to invest in it, to have some skin in the game. But to invest in something is to do so with the hope that there will someday come a return on that investment, the chance to turn our investment into something *more*.

Covenant is in a time of great transition, and not just because of all the changes in pastoral staff. This church is in transition because the role of the church in our society is in transition. There are no guarantees any more in church life. We cannot count on people coming to church or valuing what we offer or appreciating the way we have always done things.

The church's future is incredibly uncertain. Investing in the church is simply not the same as investing in a fledgling business, except that both investments involve risk. The only guarantee of investing financially in the church is that there will be no financial return on your investment. There will be no financial return, but there will be a return. It's just that the gains are not tangible, they are relational.

As Jesus tells the people who want more bread, what we really need is the kind of nourishment that won't just leave us wanting more, but which brings us a satisfaction that lasts — what Jesus calls “food that endures for eternal life.” This turns out to have little to do with food, and everything to do with relationships: a relationship with God where we continually seek more and God continually pushes us to go deeper; and relationships with others where we invest nothing less than ourselves and all the resources God has given us for this work God has called us to do.

Father Gregory Boyle once spent three months on an island that is the Mexican equivalent of Alcatraz, where 800 inmates live and spend their days in relative freedom except for two things: escape is impossible because of the shark-infested waters surrounding the island and the food is, in Boyle's words, “unspeakably bad.” The word “gruel” doesn't come close to describing it.

One day, an inmate named Beto tells Boyle to meet him at noon with his backpack at the lieutenant's garden. Boyle knows this can't be good. The lieutenant is the spectacularly mean man who runs the camp and disciplines the inmates, but Boyle follows Beto's instructions. When Beto arrives he instructs Boyle to wait, then leaps the garden fence and starts snatching every manner of ripe produce: carrots and tomatoes, peppers and zucchini, eggplant and even a couple of lemons.

Boyle knows that if they are caught there will be hell to pay — he's heard the stories of what passes for punishment on the island — but he waits for Beto, who finally leaps the fence again and dumps the stolen produce into the backpack. The two of them take off running and they don't stop until they get to a secluded spot not far from the inmates' dorm, where Beto has hidden a big pot. Beto starts a fire, then reaches into a cloth sack he's been dragging around. He pulls out, of all things, a large, live iguana, which he guts and begins to simmer in the pot. Then he takes a knife to the vegetables, slicing and dicing them and adding them to the pot.

The aroma that begins to drift from the simmering soup is heavenly, like nothing either of them has smelled for a long time. And as the scent travels, visitors begin to arrive. Boyle is nervous when the first inmate shows up. What will Beto do with this intruder? Beto simply says, “We're making soup. Join us,” and adds more water to the pot.

The man says he'll be right back and after a quick trip to the dorm, he returns with a crumbled bit of newspaper which contains a clump of coarse salt he's been saving. It goes

into the pot. The next inmate does the same thing. Sees what they're up to, receives his invitation to join them, then disappears and returns with an offering: a shriveled jalapeño pepper, which is diced and added to the soup. Another inmate contributes a rusty can of tomato paste.

When the soup finally gets served, there are eight or more men around the pot.

"Plenty to go around and just as tasty as it could be," Boyle remembers. "Everyone brought his flavor to this forbidden pot of iguana stew, and keeping anyone away and excluded was unthinkable to this band of prisoners. Alone, they didn't have much, but together, they had a potful of plenty."³

There are few promises we can make about where the church is going and what the future holds and what kind of return you can expect on your investment in this place. The only thing we can know is this: the things we do here, the ways we interact here the relationships we build here can bring meaning and value, not just to our lives, but to the life of every person who walks through those doors, each of whom - if we let them - will make a unique and important investment to the work of our community.

Alone, we don't have much, but when we believe in this counter-cultural, unpredictable, relational endeavor we call following Jesus, when we invest in this mismatched community of sinners and saints we call the church, the returns we get will indeed be imperishable, eternal, extraordinary.

Amen.

³ Gregory Boyle, *Tattoos on the Heart*, Free Press, 2010, pp. 138-141.



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Convinced of God's grace, the Church of the Covenant strives to be a caring and compassionate congregation, welcoming all people regardless of age, race, national origin, marital status, gender, affectional orientation, and mental or physical ability.