



“WHO IS THIS GUY?”

John 6:35, 41-51



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Have you ever noticed how hard it is to overcome a reputation? People who don't know you will ask people who do for 'the scoop' on you -- What's he like? We do it with employees, professors, our friends, our children's' friends -- we do it all the time! And once people have an image of you, or a label for you, it's very difficult to change it.

Jesus experienced this problem in those who thought they knew him. He had lived in a small town, in a small country. The little village of Nazareth where he grew up was tiny. In the time of Jesus, the little village didn't take up much more acreage than a football field! Everybody knew everybody in Nazareth.

People knew Jesus' mom and dad. They would have known him as he worked alongside his father Joseph as a *tekton* -- That's the Greek word we read as carpenter. *Tekton* actually means "artisan" -- including carpenter, woodworker, stonemason, and metalworker. Maybe Jesus had built a piece of furniture for them or a yoke for their oxen. Maybe he fixed their favorite tool. After all he didn't start preaching until he was about 30. It's likely that for most of life -- Jesus had a "real job." He was a skilled worker with a trade.

So you can imagine how these people responded when all of sudden here come's Jesus the *tekton* proclaiming himself to be the One that the prophets prophesied. We read in today's lesson that the people began to grumble. "Come down from heaven?! Isn't this the son of Joseph? We know him! Didn't we grow up with him? ...play in the streets with him?" This talk of Jesus' being the Bread from Heaven confused them. They already had an image of the carpenter's son -- a label.

I appreciate that they had a little trouble believing Jesus. Haven't we done the same thing to people? We put them in a box, with a neat little label. We assign them to a category. We find out where they went to school, who their parents are, where they came from. We hear their accent and we see their appearance, and we make assumptions.

Then we treat them a certain way based solely on these assumptions.

Maybe, if we're a teacher in the classroom, we'll habitually overlook them. If we're a police officer, maybe we're a tad bit more aggressive -- or forgiving -- when we pull them over. If we're the CEO or President of a company, maybe it slants the way we determine who gets a raise or promotion, and who doesn't.

None of this is intentional of course -- most of the time we aren't even conscious of it. We'll even deny it if someone calls us on it. It just saves our brains the time and energy

required to sort out each and every person individually. So we sort 'em out by category – or stereotype.

That's what the people were doing in today's reading. They were sorting out Jesus by category. "Oh, we know who you are; you're Joseph and Mary's boy. You're from Nazareth – that's farming country, isn't it? Bunch of yokels live in Nazareth. We'll try find a job for you that's not too taxing..." You know it happens. People's brains just seem to function that way.

I read a story about a guy who was talking about his most vivid memory growing up in school. Here's what he said:

In the third grade, they were asked to stand up in front of the class and say what they wanted to be when they grew up. Now, it was a fairly strict school, and every time you were asked to stand before the class, it was a pretty serious matter. He recalled very distinctly one girl who stood up and said, 'I'm going to be a movie star.' There wasn't anything special about this girl. She wasn't very pretty. Her grades were average, some of them were even below average. She didn't come from a wealthy family. In fact, the only thing the man really remembered about her was the class laughing at her. The whole class laughed at her. And the girl just stood there smiling, as if she knew something the rest of us didn't.

He goes on to say he doesn't remember ever seeing that girl again in school. But that now he sees her all the time. She's one of the biggest stars in Hollywood. Every time he sits in the movie theater and watch her up there on the silver screen, he says, 'She was always so proud of who she was. She had a dream she always held onto.' Back then, they laughed at her. Now they pay to see her."

They laughed at Jesus. "Bread from heaven? Yeah right. We know who you are. We know where you came from. We know the very house you grew up in! You're Joseph's boy." We should be careful when we start to judge someone else's potential.

Remember what God said to Samuel when he anointed David as King of Israel. As he looked at the first of David's seven brothers, Samuel thought to himself, "Surely the Lord's anointed stands here before the Lord."

But God said to Samuel, "Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart."

They laughed at David. He was 'just a shepherd.' They laughed at Jesus – just a carpenter. It makes no difference where we come from, or how we look, or how we talk, or

who our parents are, or who our partner is. We are all children of God, created in the very image of God. We all have more potential than we can ever exhaust. Moreover, there is one who can give us the strength – physical and emotional -- to make it through difficult times. Jesus is the Bread for the world that brings nourishment to our bodies and souls.

A note about bread. When I was in Santa Fe, I used to work at a Schlotzsky's sandwich shop. Well, Schlotzsky's makes their own bread, and the baker is a separate employee. The sandwich people do not make the bread. At Schlotzsky's, the bread making begins at midnight when all the ingredients are mixed together and kneaded in a huge mixing bowl. After the ingredients become dough, it's left to rise for several hours before being shaped into loaves, baked, and then cooled. The wheat flour and other ingredients become bread through this 4-5 hour process; but this 4-5 hour process at the sandwich shop doesn't even account for the time it takes for the field to be plowed, the wheat planted, grown, harvested, milled, packaged and sent to the bakery.

All of this, just to remind you that bread making is a process. Most of us are strangers to this process because we can just go to the store and grab a loaf of bread from the bread aisle. Until the wheat has gone through the process of planting, growing, harvesting, milling, mixing, kneading, and shaping, it's not bread -- until it's finally baked. For bread to be bread means that there is a sense of completion. Bread is the finished product.

We, as Christians, are not bread, because we are not yet finished. We are still being perfected in love. We are still being kneaded, shaped, or baked. Like my tomatoes – their still not quite ripe – not quite perfect.

There's only one who is perfect – who is complete. His last words in fact were, "It is finished." Just something to think about when you hear the words, "Bread of Life – Bread for the world."

Tracey Bailey stood before the judge with his head held high, his jaw set defiantly against the sentence the judge was about to pronounce. The words of his high school wrestling coach echoed in his mind: "Don't you ever hang your head. Don't admit defeat." And Tracey wouldn't hang his head, not before his ashamed and heart-broken parents, not before his shocked community, not before this judge, and certainly not before God. No one would see his pain.

The citizens of Goshen, Indiana had been stunned to learn that Tracey Bailey - captain of the wrestling team, member of the student council, good student, from the church-going Bailey family - had been one of the teens involved in the devastating

vandalism of the local high school. He had fallen in with an unruly group who used liquor to fuel their frequent petty vandalisms and thefts.

But one night, the boys, in a drunken frenzy, had broken into the high school and torn apart whole classrooms. Now the judge wanted to hold them up as an example to others with similar mayhem on their minds. Tracey was sentenced to a five-year term in the juvenile offenders' facility. Originally conceived as a lesser form of penitentiary, this facility now held hardened criminals, even murderers and rapists. It would not be a slap on the wrist.

In prison, Tracey was determined not to bend an inch. He would be tough. He would never admit defeat, no matter how much he was hurting. But during a stint in solitary confinement, Tracey happened to catch sight of himself in a mirror, and the sight shocked him. He didn't just look hardened. Deadened was more like it, and he knew that the deadness would keep reaching down past his countenance into his very soul. All his toughness melted away, and tears began to flow as he prayed to God and admitted his defeat. There was no one else to turn to, and he couldn't rely on his own reserves anymore. Tracey doesn't know how long he prayed, but he does know that God heard him. One of his guards approached him and offered him prayer. Someone else gave him a Gideon Bible. Soon he joined the prison Bible study.

Released early from the center, Tracey worked for a few months to pay off his debts and make restitution to the vandalized school. Then he entered college, studying for an education degree in science and math. He decided that he would pay back society by becoming a good role model for other confused young people. He would become a teacher. I guess you could say he reached his goal. In April 1993, Tracey Bailey attended a special ceremony at the White House where the President awarded him the National Teacher of the Year honors.

What is your dream? Don't tell me the strikes you have against you. "I'm too short. I'm too tall. I'm a girl. I'm a junkie. I'm old. I didn't go to a good school. My parents didn't have the money." Don't focus on the obstacles you have to overcome

Our God is able to overcome any obstacles. Don't forget where you came from, but what matters more is where you are going - and Who is going with you. If the Man from the tiny town of Nazareth is with you; the Man who spent most of His adult life as a carpenter; the Man who was laughed at because they knew His father and mother. If that Man is going with you then hold on for a great adventure. But on the way, be careful not to make the mistake of judging people and sorting them out on the basis of outward characteristics that have nothing to do with who they really are.

There was a saying that comes back into popularity every so often. It became popular among the special forces during the Vietnam War: “Kill ‘em all and let God sort ‘em out.”

Well – they’re half-right. We should be letting God sort ‘em out.

Then the cheesy bumper sticker saying becomes a more serious statement: Love ‘em all and let God sort ‘em out.

Amen