

The Wrong Stuff

John 6:1-27

Cradock Presbyterian Church

July 29, 2012

A couple of decades ago, there was a popular movie out that most of you probably heard of, and many of you probably saw, either in the cinema or on cable, or maybe you rented it and watched it at home. It was first of all about test pilots and their heroism; but it was most of all about the first American astronauts, the Mercury Seven, and how they were selected, tested, trained, all that. America has always loved people who do heroic things, important, historic things; so the adulation of these astronauts isn't a surprise. What was good about the movie was how it showed these men maturing as they faced the dangerous challenges that were a part of their job. In reality, they were setting a standard for all the astronauts who followed. Those astronauts who lived up to those standards were said to have "The Right Stuff."

Don't we always have some kind of standard like that in almost everything? We're always applying some kind of "ideal" that we have in our mind to people, even if parts of them don't deserve it! Those first Mercury astronauts, at least a few of them, had some serious flaws: a couple had some drinking issues that blossomed later in life, one was a womanizer, one was fairly anti-social. John Glenn, who was kind of the hero of the thing, had to learn not to be so self-righteous. I suppose the idea of the "Right Stuff" was a developing ideal!

Israel had an idea of the "Right Stuff." Their guy with the "Right Stuff" was going to be the Messiah. They'd been waiting for, oh, some 500-plus years for this Messiah to come, so they'd had plenty of time to figure out what the "Right Stuff" was going to be. He'll be incredibly powerful. He'll show he has God on his side. He'll be descended from David. He'll care for the lowest, but he'll understand POWER! He'll be a defender of *The Law*. He'll show signs from God; there will be no doubt that God has sent him. Israel had seen a lot of guys come along and *claim* to be the Messiah. They'd all failed to live up to the standards; they hadn't had the "Right Stuff." Mostly, they were lacking power and signs, and sometimes lacking any connection with David. So the people's anticipation was growing.

Then Jesus came onto the scene, and from the early reports, this was it! Or more accurately, he was the guy! The Messiah had come! He was doing signs people hadn't seen, ever. Healing people with only words, even people blind and dead or nearly dead. Caring for the poorest and the lowest. And love of the Law! He knew it better than the most learned of the Rabbis and scribes, even though he never had any formal education that anyone knew of. That knowledge could only have come from God. So *he* could only have come from God. AND he was indeed descended from David! Could it be that at long last the Messiah had come?

The problems in life always come when people confuse things of substance with the things that don't really matter. It's like worrying about whether a football player, or any athlete, for that matter, has "The Right Stuff." Is there really any substance to what they do? I'm not anti-sports, you all know me. I'm just saying! I think about what we consider as part of our list of "The Right Stuff" in America 2012, and lots of it doesn't seem like substantive stuff. How you come across, where you work, the length of time you spend in a job, and, sadly, appearances, are all part of the list that we use to decide who has and who doesn't have "The Right Stuff." Jerry Sandusky, the Penn State pedophile who's been in the news so much, would for most of his life have been said to have "The Right Stuff." Football hero, soft-spoken, articulate, long-time assistant coach at Penn State, worked with kids. Now we know how black his heart is, and how we've been deceived. Because the important things, the truly "right stuff", is deep and sometimes not so easy to see.

Just like it was for Jesus. And that was the problem. Israel loved the flash, loved the appearance. But they didn't see the deep, abiding things that were going to make all the difference. You've heard the feeding story so many times, there isn't much need to go into it. This is the same feeding story Mark has, and Matthew and Luke, with John's added knowledge that there was a small boy with five barley loaves and two fish, probably his lunch and dinner. You heard that Jesus already knew what he was going to do. When John says that he "blessed" the loaves and fish, it means he prayed over them, so everyone could hear; the crowd would have realized that following his prayer, the loaves and fish became a meal for all 5000 of them, with enough leftover to make a

statement. The statement is a huge symbol, that many in the crowd probably got: *Jesus* was enough to fill, meaning *fulfill*, the needs of all twelve of the tribes of Israel. That means *all* of Israel. That's why there were twelve baskets *full* of leftovers. Oh, and they did get it, too – that's why it says, in verse 14,

"When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, "This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world."

And then it goes on to tell us, in verse 15, that

"When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself."

So, why didn't he just let that happen? Why not just go on ahead and accept the accolades? Besides the obvious problems that would raise with the Romans, the crowd didn't really understand who Jesus was, not really. Once they did, they'd accuse him of having the Wrong Stuff – and send him off to his cross. And what guy with "The Right Stuff" would let them do that?

See, they really were looking for a worldly king, a political king. Their list of things for the "Right Stuff" was loaded with POWER stuff, beat-the-enemy stuff, obey-the-Law stuff. There wasn't any room for "Word of God" stuff. There wasn't a place for "God has a new plan for you" stuff. There was absolutely no place for "I am God's Son" stuff at all.

Hmmm. What do you do if you're Jesus, and you need to get that last stuff, that "Son of God stuff" on the list? I think that's why the very next thing that happens in our narrative is Jesus coming to the disciples on the water. He needed to show them that he had mastery over nature, and who is the master of nature? God! I'm convinced that the way the story unfolds, the disciples got it; John tells us that when they realized it was Jesus, "They *wanted* to take him into the boat." They were glad to see him! – and apparently, they understood, on some level, what he was trying to tell them. To me, that's proved by what comes next. As soon as they take him into the boat, the purpose

of this little episode is fulfilled, so there's no need to be out on the water anymore; the text reads that "immediately the boat reached the land toward which they were going."
All done!

And yet – ! The crowds are still all revved up. The tenses in the original language imply that the crowds were continually looking for Jesus; the picture is almost of a frantic search. "Where is he? He was here last night! But they only took one boat, and he wasn't in it!" When they found him finally, you get the feeling that they were almost taking him to task. But Jesus knew what they were thinking. You aren't looking for more signs for your "Right Stuff" list – you want some more bread!" And then he takes them to task: "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." There was too much "perishable stuff" on their "Right Stuff" list, which they needed to replace with the imperishable power of the Son of God.

You and I have a "Right Stuff" list, for people and for the church, that's full of perishable stuff, I'm afraid. What are the things on our list? Certainly, we have expectations for what a "good Christian" looks like. Should be proud of their appearance, so they present well for Christ. Should speak well, certainly without vulgarity or tough talk, right? Ought to have certain family traits. We will see them at church regularly. They ought to know their Bible, or at least be learning it. You get the drift. Every one of those things is human-based – just like the list Israel had put together for their Messiah. We have a list for the church, too. We think it ought to be doctrinally pure (or else why do we spend so much time worrying about thing like what to do about gays, or what version of the Bible to use?); it needs to be a source of social welfare in the community; it needs to be well-regarded and well-liked. Above all, it does a good job "recruiting" new members! When we see a church like that, we think it's got "The Right Stuff," and we assume it's doing well.

The truth is otherwise. Just as it was for Israel, these are all human-based things. There are only two things we need to do to have "The right Stuff," and they come from the mouth of Jesus: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and soul, and mind, and strength; and love your neighbor as yourself." He addressed those to Israel, and

they couldn't do them, or wouldn't do them. You know the rest of the history. He addresses them to us. Our history is not yet complete.

See, the rest of the history for Israel is that ultimately, Jesus was right. He said that day, "You are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves." That wasn't about simply *eating*; Jesus was saying, "You're interested in your own 'Right Stuff,' and not the 'Stuff' of God." We know what happened as his ministry wound down to its end. He revealed to them more and more of what God wanted; they saw more clearly how it was NOT their "Right Stuff" – *and they rejected it*. Jesus' ministry was all about "The Wrong Stuff", as far as they were concerned.

But that "Wrong Stuff" is the reason you and I are here worshipping today! God in his wisdom knew that Gentiles like us wouldn't have had a chance if Jesus was the savior of the Jews only. And he wanted to save us all. Along with that, he wanted to give us the "Right Stuff" that would enable even *more* lost children to come home to him. In that great Double Commandment, to love God and neighbor, we have the "Right Stuff" we need, both for our own survival and for the mission to which God has called us.

Sometimes you can't write a flowery end to a sermon, and this is one of those times. You know that we are working on rediscovering ourselves, trying to see what it is God has in mind for our church. Let's keep in mind the basics. Love the Lord your God with everything you've got; love your neighbor as much as and in the same way you love yourself. Those astronauts who had the "Right Stuff" soared to new heights; we will do no less.