

12th Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 8.11.24

Ephesians 4:25-5:2

So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil. Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labor and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy. Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

John 6:35, 41-51

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. Then the Jews began to complain about him because he said, "I am the bread that came down from heaven." They were saying, "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, 'I have come down from heaven?'" Jesus answered them, "Do not complain among yourselves. No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me; and I will raise that person up on the last day. It is written in the prophets, 'And they shall all be taught by God.' Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me. Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father. Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh." (434)

The house where I live is lovely, a spacious cape, the long back wall south-facing. Jesse and I moved there in 2005, when Tobias was nine months old, and Jack was yet a hope. The previous owner was a dedicated gardener, *is* a dedicated gardener, now living in a smaller house just across the street. When we moved in, there was a perennial garden in the back, along that south-facing wall. Its plantings were timed to come to color throughout the season, from early spring to late fall. After we'd moved in and spring had come, the previous owner, our new neighbor, gave us a tour of the garden and I pretended to know what she was talking about when she pointed out the different plants there.

I'm not bragging here. I'm confessing.

The first growing season we spent living there, the garden did fine. It was well planned. It fared nicely on its own, though by the end of the season the bishop's weed was beginning to mount an attack—not that I knew what that was either.

The second growing season we spent living there was the one when Jack was born. He was jaundiced as a tiny one, so I had to sit outside under the sun each day with him lying stripped down in my lap. This gave me time to watch the garden, which was doing less well this year than last.

When my dad was in touch to plan a visit, to meet the new baby, he asked, “Anything I can bring?” I imagine he was thinking to bring some lasagnas or pot pies, things for the freezer for when provisions were running low. “Your chainsaw,” was my answer. A forester by training, he hardly needed to be asked. His chainsaw was then nearly always in the back of his truck. But I wanted to be certain. “I can’t stand watching this garden anymore.”

By the end of his visit, the garden was gone.

And by this point in the sermon, I imagine some of my more important relationships have been mowed down as well.

I’m truly sorry.

But it still happens. I’d guess it’s every early spring that I stand in my back door and say to the outside, “You’re on your own. I can’t help you. I’ve got enough to do in here, with the laundry and the putting away of all the stupid stuff that gets left around the house. And the tooth-brushing. Twice a day, they tell us! Seriously, who does twice a day every day?!

The maintenance of life. It exhausts me sometimes. Like when Jesse texts around 4 PM each day to ask, “What should we have for dinner?”

We all pretend we didn’t get the text.

“Cell service around here, amiright?”

We’re still in the 6th chapter of the Gospel of John, where we’ve been for the last three weeks, where we will be for five in total. It is the dreaded gauntlet for lectionary preachers everywhere, the five weeks with the Bread of Life in late summer Year B.

If this is a cross-country road-trip, mid-summer Year B is Iowa and Nebraska.

If this is a rowing 2000-meter sprint, mid-summer Year B is the third of the four 500 meters, crucial but toilsome as well, the place in the race where you’re most likely to give up. Has seven minutes ever lasted longer?

It’s all part of a pattern in the Gospel of John, this 5th & 6th chapter, a pattern which first has Jesus perform a sign. Then he participates in a discourse, with those who object to what he’s done, or want him to explain or defend what he’s done. Lastly, he offers a discourse on the

significance of it all, what the sign he performed is signifying or significant of, what enduring truth it points to.

The signs are what elsewhere might be called miracles, are indeed in the other three gospel narratives, the synoptic gospel narratives (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), called miracles. But John's gospel calls them signs, John's Jesus calls them signs, as they aren't significant of themselves but are signifiers to what's truly significant: the enduring presence of God in Jesus, the reliable abiding and in-dwelling of God in Jesus and amidst us all. Elsewhere, Jesus healing someone who otherwise would suffer an unforgiving ailment would be called a miracle. Elsewhere Jesus walking on water would be called a miracle or feeding 5,000 people with five loaves of bread and two fish a miracle. But in the Gospel of John, these are signs of something more important please to see: the presence and will and enduring reality of God the Father in Jesus, this otherwise apparently unimpressive man, an otherwise normal Jewish peasant from Palestine.

One effect we might consider the writer here was going for in this was to draw attention away from Jesus the man, and toward the one to whom Jesus was pointing, God the Father. It's as if the writer here was cautious that this new religious movement could become a personality cult yet should not become a personality cult. It's as if the writer was straining that his audience not get fixed on the infamy and wonder of this one charismatic person, this wonder-worker, that this movement instead abide faithfully with and to what endures beneath, above, and beyond it all, and yet is very much imminent among it all as well: the stuff of life, the building blocks of the created order, the *Logos* that is the logic of the whole creation and the God who made it and sustains it and redeems it.

Ordinary stuff: extraordinary stuff, like the manna in the wilderness which we heard about last week, which is mentioned again this week as it is throughout this, John's 6th chapter. Promised to the suffering people who'd long been in the wilderness after their escaping enslavement in Egypt, there would come at last bread from heaven. The Lord promised it to Moses that Moses declare it to the people. The Lord had heard their lamenting, their hunger, their increasing hopelessness. So, the Lord said he'd deliver bread from heaven, every morning for their sustaining through the day ahead.

And yet when it came, it wasn't actually bread from heaven, but a fine, flaky substance spread across the desert floor. "What is it?" the people asked, for it not being what they were expecting. "What is it?" indeed being in Hebrew *manna*.

What it was, scholars suppose, was the secretion of night bugs of the sort still there today, high in carbohydrates and good enough provision for survival and even a sustenance of spirit.

Yet even this miraculous provision was one that needed renewal from day to day. You eat. You feel satisfied. Time passes and you're hungry again, you need to eat again. But the bread Jesus claims as being "I AM" is something you can eat and never be hungry again, a meal once and done.

As always, it's important to know that Jesus speaking in terms of "I AM" isn't to declare something about himself but to invoke God. It's easy to hear him saying, "I am the bread of life" as saying something about himself. Indeed, it's hard *not* to hear it as such, him saying something really boastful of himself. But what he's doing here is better understood as evoking and invoking the eternal God who abides among and within and above all things, and whose name is I AM, he who named himself "I AM" or "YHWH" to Moses when Moses asked his name—a name which means being, sustained and sustaining being.

Just so, when Jesus says, as he's remembered to have said in our reading this morning, "I am the bread of life," he's not proclaiming something impressive about himself but naming something essential about God, that God is the bread of life. The God whom Jesus makes present in his being and whom we as well might make present in our being, abiding in God, praying God to abide in us, breathing in the Holy Spirit of grace, breathing out the Holy Spirit of peace: this is the very bread of life. Bread that ordinary stuff that is also the stuff of the extraordinary.

What's more, Jesus goes on to say that "whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." Elsewhere in this chapter, people will ask to eat of this bread that will satisfy them for eternity, just as elsewhere in this gospel people will ask to drink of this water that they never again thirst, that they never again have to schlep to the village well for the ever-important errand of having enough water.

Which I get. I totally get wanting one fewer thing to do in the maintenance of life, one less of the things that you do only then to need to do it again, in a week, in a day, in a few hours. I totally understand the people's eager request of this.

What I don't get is Jesus' claim that so it might be with him. Because, how? Never to have to do the maintenance of live again: I just don't see any evidence of that.

Except that a lot of religious practice is about spiritual maintenance, ritualized spiritual maintenance. A lot of the practice the people of the Johannine community would have once held to was likely largely about spiritual maintenance.

The Johannine community, the group of people for whom and from whom were written the Johannine literature, the Gospel of John in the Bible and the three Letters of John in the Bible: these were people who'd been exiled from their synagogues and villages, disowned by their families and households and communities. This, for their coming to follow Jesus, for their alienating belief in Jesus.

The people would have known to expect a Messiah, but they would not have believed Jesus to be that Messiah. The Messiah would be a great warrior, not an ordinary peasant. The Messiah would avenge the people, would drive out the occupying imperial force, terrible, terrifying, tyrannical Rome. The Messiah would deal in violence for a greater good; he wouldn't take violence unto himself, shamefully crucified, only to return alive with peace on his lips and the Holy Spirit on open offer. Where was the vengeance? Where was the justice?

Yet some among these people would see in Jesus the one who would actually have the power to save, not a partisan willing to settle for partial justice, but a universal Messiah ushering in universal salvation. Extraordinary stuff, but of ordinary stuff. Such was the confession of the Johannine community, exiled, driven out, ragged individuals forced into a wilderness where they would find one another and establish community with one another, confess a belief in this unimpressive Jesus as the *logos* of the created order, the one in whom creation will come to completion.

And yet, now that they were all together, now that they were an established community, a chosen family in today's parlance, what together were they to do?

Really, what were they supposed to *do*?

So much of their religious life heretofore had been in ritualized maintenance. Washing so to be made ritually clean. Offering sacrifice, making a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, to the Temple, to offer a sacrifice there, all so to be restored to righteousness. Avoiding unclean foods. Praying at certain times. Fasting once a year.

But now came a new dispensation that made all that ritual practice come into question. It's not for nothing that in the Gospel of John the people in response to Jesus often ask, "What are we to do? What must we do to perform the works of God?" Not for nothing also, Jesus answering them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent."

Which isn't really *doing* much of anything.

It's why the earliest Christians were often condemned as antinomian, which is to say people without a law or people against the law. Though these earliest Christians had largely come

from Jewish practice, their new way of being was without any apparent law, nothing dictating what they were to do, or what they were to refrain doing, and what should then be done if they'd failed to refrain from doing that from which they were to refrain from doing?

You can see the struggle of this sudden unleashing. You can see it in the Letter to the Ephesians, where the writer is addressing a people who apparently live as if they have no law to answer to and who therefore need to be told, please, do behave yourselves. For the sake of the relationships in the churches of Ephesus, don't lie, don't steal, don't let your anger get the better of you. These habits of self-control are fruits of this new dispensation, but they aren't requirements, they haven't been codified and ritualized, they're just practical recommendations to make life together enjoyable, which is the will of God.

You can see the struggle of what happens when so many religious laws and rituals: gone.

And, get this: according to the Gospel of John, even the one of two things that Jesus is remembered to have said quite clearly we should do—these two, that we baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and that we break bread in remembrance of him—he doesn't even say. Not in the Gospel of John. The other gospel narratives remember Jesus as having instituted the Last Supper. On the night of his arrest, while he was gathered with his friends in an upper room, he did it. He said, whenever you eat of this, do so in remembrance of me, whenever you drink of this, do so in remembrance of me. But in the Gospel of John, there is no instituting of a sacramental meal. There is only all this talk of the Bread of Life, which comes to us from an extraordinary ordinary. It's as if, according to the the Gospel of John, every meal is to be blessed as a sacramental meal. It's as if the most basic stuff of life is to be recognized, believed in, as sacramental, a holy site for the indwelling of God.

So, now we've got even less to do.

Our relationship with God doesn't need maintenance. It is more reliable than that. It's more enduring. It is ever here for us to return to and repose in.

What more we might do to enshrine that, what more we might do *together* to enshrine that, can be blessed and can bring blessing. If we want to build cathedrals, we can. If we want to create schools for the cultivating of the wondrous human mind, we can. If we want to build care homes for the vulnerable among us, who will at some point in each of our lives include us, we should. If we want to organize for political purpose, to make the future one of hope, then let's do it. If we want to retreat, then that is right. However the call of God arrives in our lives, we are right to respond to. But none are essential to the lived faith John's Gospel means to inspire. None are

essential to this strange un-religion except to believe that in someone as ordinary and unimpressive as Jesus of Nazareth therein yet dwells the hope of the world, the abiding and peaceful and reliable presence of God.

Incidentally, John's Gospel quite often casts Jesus as the gardener, the gardener of God's wild creation, making it orderly and beautiful and fit for human thriving. At the Resurrection, in the garden of the tomb according to John, Mary mistakes Jesus alive for the gardener, just as at the feeding of the 5,000 in the wilderness, John remembers there being in that wild place "much grass." Truly, according to the Gospel of John, Jesus is the one whose coming brings the creation to completion that it might be Edenic for all—once again or at long last, the Eden for which we were made.

Which means ours, when it comes down to it, is to repose in hammock where we can swing in the gentle breeze.

Thanks be to God.