

Aug 25, 2024

Sermon Title: True Food & Truly Drink

Scripture: John 6:54-69

Theme: Dancing to the Eucharist Rhythms in Worship

Do you remember the words to the old spiritual, Deep River?

“Deep River, My home is over Jordan. Got to cross over into campground.” Don’t you want to go to that Gospel feast. That promised land where all is peace. Deep River, Lord, I want to cross over into campground.”

There are, perhaps, “coded” meanings in this anonymous, old song of the Church related to freedom and the underground railroad. But, for us today, the old song beckons us to cross the line in the sand, to make the good decision of faith, to take the road to freedom in Christ and never look back, to surrender control to the Holy Spirit and to proclaim and follow the gospel of peace.

Deep River is a gospel song beckoning us to cross over the line.

Did you hear the challenge in our scripture for today? The challenge to cross over?

“Jesus said to them: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have NO life in you; he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is food indeed and my blood is drink indeed... he who eats me will live because of me...this he said in the synagogue, as he taught at Capernaum.”

“Many of his disciples, when they heard it, said, “This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?” (6:60)

“It is the spirit that gives life, the flesh is of no avail; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.” (6:63)

“After this many of his disciples drew back and no longer went about with him. Jesus said to the twelve, ‘Will you also go away?’ (6:66-67)

In one of the old manuscripts for the Gospel of John, which is numbered F-13, there is a rather strange syntax in the words “my flesh is true food and my blood is truly drink” Most manuscripts use either two adjectives or two adverbs in translation of verse 55, saying either “my flesh is truly food and my blood is truly drink” or “my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink”, but F-13 is different. It uses an adjective in the first occurrence and an adverb in the second occurrence. “my flesh is true food and my blood is truly drink.”

In other words, there is a movement from adjective to adverb, from noun to verb, in what Jesus declares. This movement is important, given the overall challenge Jesus presents to his disciples in our scripture for today. As a footnote, you may remember that God’s name is actually a verb

instead of a noun—we call him the “Great I Am”, “I am who I am” or as some of the theologians say, “The ground of our Being” or “Being itself”. The name that God gives us is a verb which cannot be translated exactly as some would like to do, but leaves us with the sense that God is active and alive and uncontrollable. So, Jesus challenges his disciples to move from adjective to adverb, from Palm Sunday faith to Easter faith, from easy victories to hard-won victories under the Cross. We see in John 6:66, that many of his disciples left him at this challenge, some would not, or could not, cross the line offered by Jesus.

Part of this movement from adjective to adverb is what Jesus calls pruning the vines. The pruning process removes the branches that diminish vitality and allows the vines to concentrate their energy and produce more grapes. (John 15:1-5) If we are to continue following Jesus, we will have, at some point, entered a phase where we are pruned of our bad habits, weaned of our co-dependencies and set on a path toward Christian maturity. We will enter a phase where we realize that we must cross over, or that we are crossing over, a boundary of growth, a boundary that once limited us falsely, but now we see it in a different light. Following Jesus over the boundary frees us from of our false limitation.

But sometimes, like the disciples mentioned in John 6:66, we may fall in love with our prisons and not respond to the call to be free. We are comfortable with our habits or dependencies and do not want to leave them behind. Some of us fall away and stop following Jesus. We stop growing. We stop listening. We look to someone who will provide us an easier victory.

The poet, Robert Burns, once penned:

O would some power the giftie gie us to see ourselves as others see us.
(O would some power the gift to give us to see ourselves as others see us.)

One of my memories of the short time I spent with Rev. Jerry Johnson is his message about “habits.” Do you remember him speaking on this issue? Often our habits are unconscious; that is, they are part of our muscle memory, but not our mental awareness. As a young person, I had numerous habits that I needed to shed, one I remember is rattling my keys in my pocket, which seemed to come from an unconscious and restless desire to move on rather than linger. Just one small habit that Jerry called to my attention. When we become aware of our habits, we enter into a space where those habits no longer control us, where we have insight into our inner being, and our possibilities beyond. Prejudice can certainly be one of these habits, our minds embracing tolerance and empathy and love, but our bodies working against us, bringing in experiences from the past that just will not go away. And, when we know this about ourselves, we are better for it.

It helps us to see the larger picture, doesn't it? In our scripture for today, Jesus is trying to give us the larger picture. He is trying to hold up the mirror so that we can see. We are each of us eagles that were meant to fly free. All we need to do is spread our wings and leave our prisons behind.

Henri Nouwen writes, in his book entitled "Turn my mourning into dancing: finding hope in hard times," that "mourning and dancing are part of the same movement of grace." The Holy Spirit calls us out of our grief and teaches us new dance steps and new rhythms by which we can heal and grow. The Holy Spirit calls us to cross over, and out of, what limits our vision. The Holy Spirit calls us to the freedom of CROSS-VISION. You know what CROSS-VISION is. Remember the words from Paul's Letter to the Colossians: "You were buried with him in baptism, God made (you) alive together with him, canceling the bond which stood against us, setting that bond aside, and nailing it to the cross." (Col 2:12-4) CROSS-VISION is what allows us to nail stuff to the cross, the stuff that we no longer need, the childish ways, the self-limiting conversations of the past, our fears, rational and otherwise, our depressions, the walls that hide us from ourselves and from others. Just nail these to the cross, as the scripture says.

I have heard rumors circulating among Disciples clergy for years now, about how one of our scholars named Joey Jeter once danced on the communion table; I cannot verify whether this is true, or just one of the many stories that circulate among clergy to make a good point. I have also heard among my Catholic friends at Aquinas Institute (St. Louis University), that a Caribbean priest once danced behind the Lord's Table during the Eucharist, starting a new movement with the Catholic Faithful. I also do not know whether this is true, or simply legend. But, this I do know, that Disciples have gradually, over decades, moved theologically toward the idea of sacrament in our experience of the love of Christ at the Lord's Table. Something happens as we move from bread to wine! We feel a certain dynamo at the heart of our participation. And this has led many to feel like dancing their way to health and healing.

Of course, the eating of flesh and the drinking of blood mentioned in our Scripture for today caused much confusion and consternation among the Romans, who actually believed the Christians were a cult of cannibals and persecuted them because of it. The Romans did not understand the coded meanings of the Christian community, but they knew that members of the community did not participate in the Imperial Cult and so they persecuted them. Actually, several of the so-called mystery cults (Isis, Mithra, Orpheus, etc.) in the Roman empire required that someone be initiated into the cult by "eating and drinking of the symbolic body and blood of the cult's founder." So, the Christian community was not that different from what the Romans knew in other places, but the Romans considered them to be rebellious, so there was a heavy COST to being in the Christian community. Following Jesus could mean sacrificing your life during Roman times.

During the time of Jesus, it was a very significant decision to leave your career and follow Jesus, as did Peter and Andrew. Simon Peter would experience this costly decision after Jesus was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane when he was asked if he knew Jesus three different times around the campfire, and he denied Jesus three times.

Setting aside for a moment who is the author of the Letter to the Ephesians, and assign the following words to the Apostle Paul from Ephesians, chapter 6:

"Pray at all times in the Spirit"

"Put on the whole armor of God, the breastplate of righteousness, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, the sword of the Spirit, bind your feet with the gospel of peace"

Paul expects that there will be challenges to the Christian community in Ephesus; that there will be a COST to following Jesus. Paul goes on to reference the "mystery of the gospel."

“Pray for me, that utterance may be given me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel for which I am an ambassador in chains.”

Paul is asking the Christians in Ephesus (and other churches) to pray for his courage to cross the line in making the gospel public, all the secrets of the Christian community, to boldly proclaim the truth of the gospel with the hopes that the world at large would stop persecuting them if they knew them. This would distinguish them from the mystery cults who would never divulge their secrets to the public. The Greek phrase used by Paul, that is translated as “boldly” is the phrase “En Parrhesia”. It is often translated “out-spokenness” or “in courage or boldness” or “in openness to the public” or “in freedom of speech” and was sometimes associated with rebellious speech within the empire. Paul prayed for such boldness and freedom; he prayed for this courage in the Spirit.

No longer would the story of Christianity be limited to the few, confined to secrecy and hidden under a bushel basket. Paul was asking for courage to go public in the mighty Roman empire for which the cost might well be death and not just prison chains. He also worries about the Ephesians and others who might also suffer because of his decision to cross over to spiritual freedom with regard to the mysteries of the gospel.

But, back to Jesus, and to the disciples who fell away from following him because of his teaching and his syntax. Some, we are told, could not or would not cross over the line. I wonder what was going through their minds when they fell away with their heads down. After having turned their hand to the plow, all of a sudden, they stopped plowing and walked away. Perhaps they wanted to return to the beginning and start all over again, when faith was new and conversations were exciting and they were safe within the sanctuary of the synagogue at Capernaum. But, you know, salvation is more than being safe in the sanctuary. You must eventually leave the sanctuary. The psalms remind us of the larger picture: “I led you to a wide place.” “I led you to a crossroads”. Salvation is not repeatedly starting over until you get it right. Once you choose to follow Jesus, you can never return to make a different choice—the die is cast.

Joshua summons all the tribes of Israel to Shechem, along with all their elders, judges and leaders. “Choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the river in Egypt, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell or the Lord who has been faithful to you. As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord. Then the people answered, “Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord, to serve other gods, for it is the Lord our God who brought us and our fathers up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage, Therefore we also will serve the Lord, for he is our God.”

Colossians 3:16 “Let the peace of (from) God rule (*brabeuó* – make the call) in your hearts ... And be thankful. Let the word of Christ (find a home in you) dwell in you richly (*plousiós*).” (15-16).

In the Gospel of John, Jesus describes his body, the elements of communion, as his flesh and blood, as true food and truly drink. The adverb ‘truly’ indicating movement as we partake from the One loaf to the One cup. “Truly drink,” “dwelling richly.” They are related. Christ dwells richly in the Lord’s Supper. The Holy Spirit moves us through the elements as we partake of the One Body of Christ. When Paul speaks of letting peace rule in your hearts, he is using a Greek verb taken from athletic contests (Olympics) which means “let the referee, the umpire, make the

call on the field.” You may honestly feel that the call is wrong, but the Spirit of the Sport, asks us to accept the ruling on the field. Sportsmanship means giving over authority to the referee, the umpire, even if you feel like complaining or throwing a temper-tantrum. The Spirit of Christ asks us to allow Peace to have the final word.

The spirit of the two passages, the spirit of dwelling richly, is precisely this, ‘that we allow the peace of God to umpire in our hearts! Athletically speaking, we allow peace to make the call when there is conflict in our hearts; that we allow the word of Christ to find a home in our hearts. Let peace not be a stranger; let Christ’s word not be a stranger! To dwell richly means to dwell close by, to dwell as a welcome friend, rather than a suspicious acquaintance.

Alleluia! Amen.