

St. Mark's Episcopal Church  
Sunday August 12, 2018 Proper 14B  
Homilist: The Rev. Christopher McLaren  
Text: John 6: 35-51  
Theme: Junk!

*Jesus said, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." -John 6:35*

I remember going forward to receive communion long ago at a Great Vigil of Easter at my home parish of St. Timothy's in Salem, Oregon. It had been a moving service with adult baptism and a passionate sermon. As the priest distributed the bread he said, "The body of Christ the bread of immortality." He changed the words that night to emphasize the resurrection but it caught me off guard. What was I eating? What did the Eucharist mean to me?

It was a moment that I became conscious of the power of this ritual act. That each time I approach the altar of God and ingest the body of Christ I am eating food that leads to immortality. I am connecting myself with the one who undid death. I am binding myself to the living God in Christ. It was a moment in which a shift occurred in my understanding of the Eucharist. That slowly over time my participation in the life of the church and its worship was meant to help me become more and more connected to the person of Jesus and his way of being in the world.

We all need a shift in our consciousness. Each one of us are perfectly capable of being stuck in the everydayness of life. We can become so focused on externals that we miss the deeper work in front of us, the deeper meaning and growth that is always available to us. Listen to this story about someone trying to help a person get out of everydayness and into a deeper communion with her children.

At a retreat a woman stood up and quickly shared her problem. "I'm tired of being an apple giver." She had three small children under the age of five. They were always on her. "Mommy get me an apple." "Mommy please tie my shoe." Mommy put on my coat." "Mommy I need help." Never ending. She was sick of it.

The group listening to the woman was instantly supportive. Many had been there, and there was no shortage of advice: part-time employment, more husband-father involvement, etc. In the midst of these suggestions, another voice was suddenly heard. An older woman spoke up, **“Honey, you gotta learn to sing.”** Then she went on to explain that the “apple giver” had to change her whole attitude. None of these escapist suggestions were going to provide lasting help. Tinkering with the outer world was not a substitute for inner change. She had to make “apple giving” an event where she and her child met. It was deep and sage advice but it was difficult to hear as grappling with one’s own inner life and change is always difficult.

I believe that we come to church at St. Mark’s or in the park here to change from the inside out. The spiritual life is really about the inner work that enables a new and incisive action. I realize that so much of what passes for spirituality, even Christian spirituality is actually a fierce holding on to the status quo and a dogged determinism not to be wrong or admit that one needs to change. And this really is one of the saddest misunderstandings that too many religious people have. However, if we think a little harder about our own inner lives and what Jesus is often asking of us, we can see that change and growth is essential to the spiritual life. We are unfinished creations of God and being on the adventure with Jesus as a disciple is to be both nourished and changed more and more into Christ’s likeness. There is nothing more challenging and transformative and beautiful than forgiving one another, admitting to our brokenness and errors, acknowledging how addicted we are to the culture of death around us, or admitting to our selfish motivations and actions. The biggest problem with having a spiritual life is being willing to change and grow because it is difficult and sometimes painful. However, the most wonderful part of having an active spiritual life is that it leads to joy, joy on the path to knowing God, joy in knowing yourself and joy in being in relationship with those who are sharing the journey with you.

I don’t want this sermon to be too long in the park here so I want to end with a story of transformation that I read recently that I found very moving. The author entitled the story “Junk!”

God bless my mother, and God bless me. We made it through. She had a stroke and long period of rehabilitation, and it was clear she was going to have to stay with us for a while. I had all these things in mind: it was a chance to pay her back for all those years. There were these things I was going to help her clear up, like the way she was thinking. I wanted to do the whole job very well, this big opportunity. We should all feel good about it at the end. Little things like that. Some "little!"

Fights? Classics, like only a mother and daughter can have. And my mother is a great fighter, from the Old School of somehow loving it and being very good at it and getting a kind of ecstatic look in your eye when you're really into it. I guess I'm exaggerating. It drives me a little crazy. I hate to argue. Oh, well...

But it got bad. Over a hard-boiled egg we had a bad fight. We'd both gotten worn out, irritable, and frustrated. Boom! I don't remember what about- just about how it was going and why her stay had gotten difficult and all of us had become more and more irritable and short-tempered.

In the middle of it, she stopped short and said, "Why are you doing all of this for me anyway?" It sort-of hit me and I started to list all the reasons. They just came out: I was afraid of her; I wanted to get her well; I felt maybe I'd ignored her when I was younger; I needed to show her I was strong; I needed to get her ready for going home alone; old age; and on and on. I was amazed myself. I could have gone on giving reasons all night. Even she was impressed.

"Junk," she said when I was done.

"Junk?" I yelled. Like boy, she'd made a real mistake with that remark. I could really get her now.

"Yes, junk," she said again, but a little more quietly. And that little more-quietly tone got me. And she went on: "You don't have to have all those reasons. We love each other. That's enough."

I felt like a child again. Having your parents show you something that's true, but you don't feel put down-you feel better, because it is true, and

you know it, even though you are a child. I said, "You're right. You're really right, I'm sorry."

She said, "Don't be sorry. Junk is fine. It's what you don't need anymore. I love you."

It was a wonderful moment, and the fight stopped, which my mother accepted a little reluctantly. No, I'm joking-she was very pleased. She saw how it all was. Everything after that was just, well, easier-less pressure, less trying, less pushing, happening more itself. And the visit ended up fine. We just spent time together and then she went back to her house.

(Ram Dass and Paul Gorman, How Can I Help? ; Stories and Reflections on Service [New York: Knopf/Random House, Inc. 1985] 191-192.

I'm not sure why you come to the Eucharistic table each week. You may have all kinds of reasons, many of them perfectly valid. The whole ritual comforts you; you are still trying to make up for a failure from long ago, you have a deep hunger at the center of your life, you need strength for the journey, you want to be around like-minded people in this difficult life, you know that there has to be more to life than what we can see. There is nothing wrong with any of these reasons to reach out for the bread of life and the cup of salvation and I would never call them "Junk," but I wonder if the main reason we all come is, to know God's love.

When Jesus says, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

He is telling us that we are loved. That the divine love flows right through him into us and has since the beginning of creation. The love of God is already placed deep within our hearts. What is needed is to accept it and to feast on it. In this Eucharistic meal today allow yourself to hear one surprising message, "We love each other, that's enough."

*I am grateful for the story entitled, Junk, that I found in a commentary by John Shea.*