

One wild and precious life: it is all we have

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Buddy Stallings, Vicar,
at the eleven o'clock service, August 2, 2009: The Ninth Sunday after Pentecost.
Based on John 6:24-35*

On some Sunday mornings, I find myself wondering what on earth we are doing here. Have we come for the beauty of this place, for the wonder of its soaring architecture, surely a gift to us and the entire city? Are we here for the music, music so rich and beautiful that it stirs us almost to tears? Have we come for the community, one we know and of which we feel a part, or one perhaps for which we still seek? Is it that the ancient liturgy draws us here, vaguely connecting to something deep in us, something we once knew and wish to reclaim or something that yet painfully eludes us?

For most of us the answer to each of these questions is “yes, in part, that is why I have come.” We are here at the behest of many motivations, and I have trouble imagining a bad one except perhaps our being here in response to an old voice of someone else telling us we “should” go to church. Oddly, though, in the mystery which is God, even such a reason as that can lead to the surprise of grace. The practice of religion in our culture is complicated, even difficult; in fact, many claim that it is a minefield and have given up. Perhaps they are right, though I hope not. But I do know that it is tricky for me and that it seems to be for many of us who diligently continue to search. I think it is because our practice so rarely seems to have much connection to our lives. We split our spiritual yearning apart from our “real” life and pay a high price for it. As I grappled with these passages today, each wonderful in its way, I kept asking myself what any of it has to do with us. Are we seeking to find something in these old stories where there is nothing to be found? Should we expand our search? What is the answer?

On a first reading of words like these in Ephesians, attributed probably erroneously to Paul, “we must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine,” my response is positive, hearing it as a call to remain who we are. But then I begin to wonder if it is not a hint of a church already clamping down, fearful that the only way to have God, certainly to claim exclusive possession, is to hold God in tighter and tighter containers, assuming that the little bit of God we know is all there is. And, then, there is John’s gospel, a

narrative we love for its beauty and for its unapologetic christocentrism. We are Christians after all, and this is our story. And, yet, at the same time we are strangely troubled by John’s claim, and I believe it is the unmistakable claim of his gospel, that Jesus is the one, the one alone who is the bread of life. We shouldn’t be surprised; it is this John’s Jesus who says, “I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father except through me.” We ponder such claims as well we should, wondering what sway they must hold for us.

Both in preparation for this sermon and as one of my one thousand and one ways to procrastinate, I reread an old sermon on this passage, which I wrote shortly after I was ordained. We hang on to these things as though they are some day going to be bound and embossed for the next generation. We know better, of course, but delusion has gotten us through more than one bad day. The sermon was okay; it was filled with nice words and was clearly well-intended, if somewhat insipid, and probably did little overt damage to the Kingdom of God. That is another thing we sometimes overestimate—the potential of our impact in either direction. It cautioned about the danger of spending all our time working for food that does not last to the exclusion of seeking that which lasts forever. I was so full of my own story of having recently left the business world to become a priest, as though I had taken a vow of poverty, which I never took and, for the record, a vow in which I have no current interest. We live in a material world; if Jesus’ words are truly to call us—every one of us—to the non-material world, we are in big trouble because this material one is the one we live in and the only one we have. His words no doubt are deeper and less literal than that.

When I read this passage now, these decades later, the old story is the same; and it is a wonderful story. Images of bread, abundant bread, warm, fragrant, and full, speak to deep yearnings within us. But now as then it is too often an account of a man, Jesus, who has been controlled by our limited imaginations. In fact, what we “know” of him we have practically created by worshipping him in a tightly conceived and consensual way, by refusing to see beyond the restrictions of his own cultural limitations, and by watering down his words about love even as we have codified and

cherished the claims we and others have concluded to be true about him. What began as a person—a person of God—somehow got translated as a religion, a system of thought rather than a relationship.

And, yet, I believe with all my heart that this person, Jesus, who lives in the reality of the one we call Christ, does in fact continue to speak to us, through us, around us and, yes, even through these ancient words and stories. At any given moment, I might be able to say how he speaks to me; and at any other moment I might be unable to even imagine such a thing. Sometimes the message filters through quiet, liturgy, music, the usual and prescriptive ways; most often I catch a sense of Christ through the presence and love of others in reverent and irreverent ways but always in profoundly human ways. Sometimes his message comes most loudly and clearly through a film or a book. This week, for example, seeing *The Hurt Locker* was a deeply religious experience for me. A film about death and war, it has no high-minded political message we can use to defuse the feelings it engenders in us. Refusing to tie up any loose ends or to satisfy our need for one clear message, it paints a picture of love that is complicated, contradictory, and eternal. In reality that describes much of life; and it is critical to me that I can find Christ not on some beautiful but rarefied edge of life but squarely in the midst and mess of it.

When we liberate Christ from ancient and churchy images, allowing him into the center of our “real” lives, then we finally stand the chance of knowing what it means to be shaped and formed in the image of Christ. If we do not do that, if somehow we continue to insist that the only way of experiencing meaningful faith is to find it exclusively in other worldly and old notions, the practice of our faith will not make a difference in our lives. And it—the practice, not the reality—will fade away. And it should. No matter how rich and full, our tradition alone will provide us only a beautiful and interesting museum, which is not without great worth. But if we truly want to be transformed by the presence of Christ in our lives, faith must become much more

present than that. And I believe that presence is available to us.

If we listen, we can hear in the words of Jesus, perhaps in words that even he could not have fully explained, the key to what we want. “For the bread of God,” Jesus said, “is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” What is that the bread of God does? It gives life to the world. Life is what Christ is about, life now, life rich, complete, joyous. So sadly the message of the church has not always sounded like a call to life but more a call to hold life back. Jesus’ message seems to be, “Don’t waste your time on things that do not matter; find what is good and real and give your life to it.” A beloved poet of our era, Mary Oliver, echoes Jesus’ words when she asks, “Tell me—what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?”

What indeed do we plan to do with our “one wild and precious life?” This is the spiritual question that Christ puts before us; and if it scares us to death, we need to leave this moment to be busily about answering it—not to prepare for eternal life but so as not to miss this one! What we do for a living, how we spend our money, what we believe, the passions and causes we embrace—all are for nothing unless they—like the bread of God—bring life to us and to the world around us. Jesus’ “one wild and precious life” was a gift of love. When we sift through all that he is recorded to have said, when we behold the acts of goodness and generosity that are done in his name, we know that the life to which we are called is a life of love. When all else is said and done, when the creeds have been analyzed ad nauseam, when theological precision is as sharp and piercing as a needle, what remains is the way of love. Nothing else matters. As this truth began to settle around those who heard Jesus that day so long ago, as they began to understand a bit about the gift they were being offered, little wonder that they exclaimed, “Sir, give us this bread always.”

And still today, it is the deepest prayer on our lips: “Sir, give us this bread always.”

In the name of God: Amen.

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