

August 12, 2018  
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 Proper 14/ John 6:35, 41-45

Well, three weeks ago, just before Jed left on vacation, he announced you would be hearing about the Gospel of John for the next four weeks so he decided to preach that week on the reading from Samuel. Last week Bill Ellis noted that Jed said you will have four weeks on the Gospel of John while he is away, and he preached on the reading from Samuel.

This week I am going to give a nod to the Gospel of John. But first, a nod to Bill Ellis.

Last week Bill reminded us that our understanding of humanity, the imperatives of justice and the right of kings has changed over the centuries. So has the way we talk about God.

In days of old, when Samuel was written, women were considered property. The king was tantamount to being the state. And justice had more to do with keeping things and people in their place. And the name of God was used to justify such order.

Well, our thinking has evolved somewhat over time. We no longer believe women are property. The king is not the state. (And thank God we don't have kings anymore....) Justice is about systemic fairness and distribution. And our understanding of God and ourselves is taking on new dimensions. This is all good. In light of changing times and further knowledge we continue the struggle to be honest with ourselves about what we believe and why.

I loved Bill's affirmation that the Judeo Christian tradition has always been a developing story. The Judeo Christian tradition "is dynamic," he said. "It leads us - and has always led us - in the direction of an ever expanding view of God's love and of an ever expanding view of just who we are called [to be and] name as neighbor." Bill went on to say, "We have resisted that dynamism every step of the way because following through on the evolution of our tradition is agonizingly hard work.... It is so much easier," he said, "to believe our tradition is static..."

It is so much easier to believe our tradition is static. And I would add, we might even prefer it that way. But our tradition is not a static one. It is a living tradition.

Another great thinker put it this way. Carl Jung said:

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That's true about our tradition. And us as well.

Now to John's Gospel.

I am caught by this complaint as reported in our Gospel story: "I am the bread that came down from heaven....Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, I have come down from heaven.

When John wrote this story the cosmos was imagined as a three-story universe. There was heaven, up there, earth here, and sheol, an underworld, down there. And a myriad of beings in between. Heaven was considered a place. And in the great hierarchy of things, places and beings got better as you went up. God, of course, was at the top.

Today we know that heaven is not a place "up there." Well, we pretty much do. On one level we know from science and cosmology that there isn't a place we can call heaven that sits somewhere, out there, atop this world and in fact will be the next. But so much of our prayer and liturgical language, our hymns and even our gaze turns heavenward. Heaven is really symbol language for an idealized realm. A realm of possibility. We really don't think of its "location" the same way the ancients did. Or maybe we do.....

Regardless, we know what John is getting at when he has Jesus say "I am the bread that came down from heaven." It is the claim that Jesus is God's exemplar, Jesus sits "at the right hand of God", if you will. And of course if we literalize that some will surely complain...and if we don't literalize that there will be others who will surely complain!

We do want to take this story telling seriously. So, I suggest what John is saying is that in Jesus we see true power. In Jesus we see life for the world. In Jesus our ideal is embodied. And what he embodies is possible in us. In ancient parlance it could be said, "Jesus came down from heaven."

Jesus' power was considered rival to the kingdom power of his day. The kingdom of Caesar wanted to claim the imprimatur of God. Heaven forbid that such power was attributed to Jesus. So, there was murmuring. And complaint. Suspicion. And fear.

Now what about the bread. I am the bread of life. In the ancient world it was common to say that bread was a needed daily source of nourishment. It was an integral part of the every day. And if not available to all, it should be shared by all.

To say to a community "Jesus is the bread of life" is to affirm he is a daily source of nourishment, an integral part of our life together, and is "available to all." Writ large, when we hear Jesus in John's Gospel say "I am the Bread of Life" we get it. And John's community got it too. They understood what this meant. Because it was part of their lived experience. This saying did not need to be explained.

The “I am” sayings in John’s gospel have long been beloved. They have traditionally been considered the actual words of Jesus. Spoken by him. They are red-letter sayings in old editions of the Bible. These sayings are powerful. Provocative. Affirming. We know most of them by heart.

But, and here we acknowledge the evolving understanding of our tradition, scholars tell us that Jesus did not say these things. Not a one. I know, the first time I heard that I sucked air.

The author of John’s gospel put these words into Jesus’s mouth. John filled in the speech bubbles: I am the Bread of Life. I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. I am the Door. I am the Vine. I am the Resurrection. But these words were not spoken by Jesus. For many of us these words have been the basis of our faith and devotion. (And what do these scholars know about faith anyway!)

Well, consider what I said a moment ago. The community of John’s Gospel knew what it meant that Jesus was the Bread of Life. They knew it from their own experience. Decades after his execution the followers of Jesus continued to be nourished, sustained, strengthened, fed by his teachings and presence as it continued to be experienced within their community. Jesus continued to give them something to chew on! The heart of this saying is made clear at the end of our reading today: “The bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.” Jesus enfleshed his understanding. He lived it. He embodied it. And the community’s task was to integrate that understanding into their own body and blood. And live it. We are called to do the same.

Yes, Jesus is the Bread of Life. Yes, Jesus is a door...For me he flung wide a greater sense of myself and God and human possibility and hope for a better world and I crossed a threshold in understanding because of that seeing.... Jesus is a Vine for me...I draw my nourishment from him, I grow, I become an extension of him, I bring life into the world....Jesus is the Way....and that Way is known in all the great traditions. Jesus is the Resurrection. There is life after death. Here. And it takes all we can give to break the gravity of loss’s fierce undertow. But we can do it.

What makes the I Am sayings true is our experience of them. Not because we are told to believe those things about Jesus alone, or that Jesus even said them. I suggest our evolving understanding of the Gospel of John deepens our way of seeing Jesus and moves us to reflect on the experience of the early communities and of our own. In so doing, we are helped to language the transforming effect Jesus has had on us, then and now. And therefore, he continues to live.

Our tradition’s strength is that it is dynamic. It will retain its integrity because we allow it to change and evolve. That may sound paradoxical. But “only a thing that changes and evolves lives.” And our understanding evolves, too. It must. We must

bring the light of our new day to illumine our tradition. So it can change....and continue to live.

Now a post script on our evolving tradition....[At the 10:15 service] [In a few moments, at the time of offering a blessing and prayer celebrating anniversaries and birthdays] we are going to bless a little rookie named Andrew. He is 6 months old. He is not going to be baptized. I want to mention this because I think our willingness to provide a blessing and not require a baptism is part of our evolving understanding of who we are as a community and what we offer. And offer freely.

Karen and Ed Hauswald's son Scott and his wife Jana live in Germany. They are visiting here. They were clear they wanted Andrew to have a blessing but not a baptism. And for good reason. They weren't sure what it signified.

Christian beliefs and prejudices as you know run the gamut. We are fundamentalists and progressives, soft literalists and hard, political activists and not so much, Republican and Democrat. And we self-identity as Christian. And then there is the trouble that some Christians don't think those other Christians are really Christian at all. So, if being baptized is indeed a very Christian thing to do, and it is....what does it signify and what are we joining? A good and fair question. Especially in these times.

For us in this place, we know that baptism is our way of saying "I am so glad you are here. Welcome!" I am so glad you are here.

We honor the dignity of every human being. You matter. We want you to know you matter. And you are not alone. We urge you to embrace community, wherever you are. "We are members of one another," as our epistle reading puts it, "be kind to one another, tenderhearted....live in love." We have ups and downs. The pattern of human life is dying and rising. There is fear and trembling. And awe and wonder. We trust that it is all privilege. And you are part of this remarkable "family of things." We are so glad you are here.

We know that baptism is not about getting the baby done to be sure it will get into heaven. That's really unfortunate shorthand for a much more profound celebration.

Beneath the liturgical language, beneath the stories from our tradition, within the powerful symbol language we use, at the heart of Baptism is a rite of welcome. And an affirmation of our solidarity and advocacy for the entire human race. And for the world in which we live.

But for an outsider the combination of ancient language and daring metaphors and current confusion about what we Christians believe or don't may be off putting.

So I admire and respect Scott and Jana's hesitancy in having Andrew baptized. I get it.

What I love is the fact that they knew they could come here and receive a blessing and that we would get it! They knew we get blessing. And give them.

And what is it to bless? To bless is to honor. To give favor. To acknowledge grace. It is an exclamation of gratitude and admiration. The great Jewish theologian and philosopher Abraham Heschel said "just to be is a blessing." Just to be is blessing.

There is no requirement for being blessed. There is no oath that needs to be taken. No vows that need to be made. No creed that needs to be sounded. Just to be is blessing. We get that. And we want everyone to know that about themselves too.

Blessing is public gratitude. It is not a privilege of membership here. Or a gift of Christianity in particular. It is an affirmation of the privilege and wonder of human existence and all existence. And an acknowledgement of our deep responsibility to honor and help sustain it. May Scott and Jana and in time Andrew know, as we do, that they are so blessed they too can bless.

There was a time when only the baptized could enter the church and be welcomed at the table. We have come a long way. What happens here, and at this table, what it signifies and affirms, is so important to us, we want everyone to know they are welcome to come and taste and see for themselves.