

St James United Church



Message for August 18, 2024 Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

“Companioned in God” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

2 Samuel 18:5-9, 15, 21 and 31-33; John 6:35, 41-51, and an excerpt from Parker J. Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass), p. 5

Bread. We savoured it earlier in the service. We call it the staff of life. And it is for many, cultures all around the world having a kind of bread which they share. This makes it a staple emotionally and not just physically. As I said earlier, the word companion comes from the Latin *com* and *panis*, “with bread” because sharing food is how many people affirm their relationships.

How significant then for Jesus to call himself the bread of life. In this I hear him say he came to bring us something essential, to offer a companionship and connection without which we can't live, at least not fully. His saying points back to the Book of Deuteronomy when Moses explains that the people were given manna as a reminder they cannot live just by bread but by every word that comes from God. God's words, God's teaching, is focused on how we treat each other. We are also told in John 1 that Jesus is the divine word, so these sayings about word and bread, are about our relationships, about how Jesus came to nurture our connection to God, and to each other as an expression of that divine relationship, eternal life present in the lives which we share.

It is all very lovely isn't it? But then he says something that throws everyone off - that the bread he gives for the life of the world is his flesh. As we'll hear next week, this throws off so many they stop following him, so why did he add it? Well, even though we tend to think it is a teaching about communion, it most likely refers to his coming death. In this I hear the reality of how we treat one another and the suffering we can experience as a result. We hear about something similar in our Second Samuel reading as David's son Absalom tries to take the crown and is killed for rebelling against his dad. It's heartbreaking as David cries “Absalom, O Absalom, would I had died instead of you.” He cries knowing he brought much of the tragedy onto himself, grieving not just Absalom but another son, Amnon, killed by Absalom in revenge for the rape of their sister Tamar, grieves her as well, along with his first son with Bathsheba. It is so very, very sad.

And yet surprisingly this sad story, alongside the tragedy of Jesus' death, connects to what I said earlier about bread being a sign of our relationship with God and each other. I discovered this not from a theology text or bible commentary but talking with Glen about bread. As many of you know, he's a professionally trained baker and he told me many things not found in a commentary – like how yeast is activated by adding it to milk or sweetened water because it is an organism and needs the lactose or sucrose to eat, how it's the “by-product” of yeast digesting starch that makes the dough rise, how the dough needs to rise twice to give bread the texture we enjoy. But most pertinent to our readings is how important it is to knead the dough if it is to rise. The

process helps form strands of gluten, the stress on the dough strengthening the strands to give the bread the structure which holds the bubbles made by the yeast. The dough goes through an ordeal as it is pushed, punched, and prodded, but without it the dough would collapse and we wouldn't have bread to share, the bread that companions us to each other.

And often, hard as it is, similar realities help us rise, help us grow spiritually and so connect us to God and each other as well. We've long taught that humans are disconnected from God, that God is distant, angry even, judging us for a sin our first parents committed in a mythic time. That story though says more about how we think of God, and as a consequence how we think of each other, than what God is actually like, or who we're to be with each other as we take who God is seriously in our lives. For that we need to turn to prophets and mystics, one of whom is Julian of Norwich. She lived in 14th century England and had a series of visions as she lay near death. She was shown that God is All-Love and so incapable of wrath, discerning then that the belief that God is distant is an illusion, that we're actually joined to, "oned" with God, but fail to see it, and so act on that in our lives. Her insight is confirmed by faiths like Buddhism which teaches that our sense of separation from God and each other stems from our ego. Now we need an ego as part of healthy psychological development as children but as adults the tendency to cling to it can keep us fearful of God and suspicious of others. Instead, over time we are to become less attached to ourselves, to recognize that we belong to God and each other. Now we still sin, that is hurt others, like David with Bathsheba, with his children, but our belief that doing so distances God from us in the end can lead to further sin, because in our fear we do things to numb it. But this compounds the guilt and we sin again with more fear and the cycle continues. Instead we're to turn to God, remembering who we are in God and who we are to each other.

In this context Jesus' death on the cross is key, but not just as something he does, but in showing us a pattern we are to emulate, letting go of ourselves for others. When we do, we let go of our false separation and recover who we are. We often discover this when we deeply love someone. And getting back to our story about David, ego attachment can also fall away when we experience great loss, like in an illness, a breakup or the death of someone we love. In those moments we die to ourselves, to who we thought we were. As we drop our ego we open space for God to connect with us. We also make space to connect to others, in our grief becoming compassionately aware that we are not alone in grief but part of a grieving community. In this we begin to grow, to renew, like what Parker Palmer sees as trees grow following the storm, the loss of so many making way for the forest to renew itself. And this is what happens to David as he grieves and dies to who he thought he was. Here I think is why he is viewed as righteous. As he finally grieved for all he did, all he lost, he finally turned to God, and made space in his heart for others. And we often experience the same.

Jesus is the bread of life, come to nurture our relationships with God and each other. But he is so not on his own but invites us to share what this can mean with each other. We may go through experiences like a kneading of dough, but they give us strength and enable us to hold the air of holy love within us, and between us, that we may be companions with each other, companions with Jesus, companions with God. May it be so. Amen.