

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
The Rev. Barbara Hutchinson
Proper 13 Year B

Carenda was sharing with me this week reflections from a job interview she engaged with recently. Someone had suggested she ask the search committee what passage from scripture best represents who they are as a community of believers. I'm paraphrasing her description of their response, but basically, they looked at her as though she had 2 heads and was asking the most insane or irrelevant question possible. They couldn't come up with an answer. Now there might have been for several reasons for that: perhaps they don't really know who they are as a community; or how God's story is reflected in their story; or perhaps, they like many Episcopalians don't really know their Bible very well. We often joke, or take this distorted sense of pride, that we aren't or don't need to be very literate in our biblical studies as Episcopalians, which of course makes no sense, when scripture is one of the 3 legs of the 3 legged stool that Anglicanism was centered upon.

But it's a real perception that others have of us, and a crutch we can use to get us off the hook of intentional scripture study. At Larry Bradshaw's funeral, I had invited the pastor from Mary's church, the First Church of God to read the gospel. As he was leaving the service and we were making plans to meet at the cemetery, he said, he had to run back in and pick up his Bible. We both kind of smiled, for we knew what he really meant. He thought he better bring his own Bible along for the reading, in case he couldn't find a bible in an Episcopal Church!

Part of the message in our scripture passages this morning is that we are called to live a life worthy of the calling of Christ, which does mean we are to be committed to growing in spiritual maturity, in knowledge and comprehension of our scriptures and its application to our daily lives, and in the offering of our gifts to build up the community through love. This is one reason it pleases me so that so many of you are engaged in either our Wednesday or Sunday offering of the series "Embracing An Adult Faith". It is what we're called to do.

So anyway, when Carenda was relaying this experience to me, I immediately wondered what would our scripture passage be? What phrase or situation in the Bible would I use to describe who I think we are as a body of Christ here at St. Andrew's this day? I encourage you to do this thinking too. You may want to start by reading through the gospels, listening to and inserting yourself into the parables or the healing stories of Jesus, or even imagine Jesus' life, pre and post Easter and see where we fit in on that timeline. You may ask yourself, are we in the bewilderment and despair of watching Jesus hang on the cross and not knowing what happened, or are we sitting with Jesus on the beach, while he's frying fish for breakfast with his friends, and telling us to go and feed his sheep?

Well, the passage that immediately came to my mind for who we are now was actually from the book of psalms. My instant response for a scripture passage was Psalm 34, verse 8:

O taste and see that the LORD is good; happy are those who take refuge in him. Perhaps this scripture passage came to my mind because I sense the joy that is present here, the fact that we know the Lord is good and we show it to others; perhaps it's the undercurrent of endless and open invitation for all to come and partake in the gift of Christ, or the expectation that we will leave changed by the experience that the Lord is good and present and real here in our Eucharist, and the sense that those who take refuge in God, those who sit in the presence of God, those who are intentional about building their spiritual practices will find a joy that is a deep happiness, that the world itself cannot give. Perhaps I thought of this passage because I am attuned to the spiritual sense of joy, real and renewed life, and abundance that characterizes so much of what we do here.

Perhaps it also because I could also take this passage literally and still have it to be true. People do taste and see the goodness of the Lord here because we actually fed the hungry. People do taste and see the goodness of the Lord and are fed by our abundance in the heaping platefuls of food we offer at our community dinners, or by our willingness to fill up their drinks time and time again until they are no longer thirsty, and our generous invitation to pack up take-home boxes for our guests to be nourished again and again, until they are filled.

For being part of the body of Christ, of being together in love, means there is this very spiritual connection between and among us, which I affirm at the blessing, when I say, may the blessing of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, be among you now and remain with you forever, **and** it is also made real in very tangible ways, through the pencil cases we collect today, in the food we will present to our guests on Monday evening, and through the lunch bags we will pack on Tuesday morning for the Summer Lunch Program.

I believe it is this sense of both/and, (spiritual and physically tangible) which is important in the unpacking of our belief in Christ, and it is that which Jesus is inviting his disciples into, toward this unitive way of thinking during our gospel passage this morning.

The disciples seem to want to stay tied up in the tangible, "Sir, please give us this bread always", rather than seeing that this miracle of feeding the 5000 was actually a sign that pointed to the ever-living present of Christ, the living bread of life, which will always be with them, whenever they stretch out their hand. Jesus was working to move them from the physical hunger he could meet through the distribution of the 5 loaves, to the spiritual hunger he could meet through the breaking of the bread.

So let's look at why it was important for the disciples and now for us to make the shift, from believing and relying only what we can see, taste, and feel in our tangible real world to the spiritual component of new and unending life offered through the resurrection.

The disciples had witnessed one of the most amazing miracles, the feeding of the 5000, and they followed Jesus because they wanted it to happen again, and again. They wanted God to take care of them, to solve their immediate needs. They thought that relying on

God meant that they were somehow entitled to receive over and over again the visible proof of God's love, as their ancestors had received the manna in the wilderness, morning after morning. Somehow they thought that it was a faithful response to trust that God would do their work for them, by providing for their basic and every need, which led them to a state of wanting immediate and constant proof, through God's direct blessing of them, in order for them to really believe. Can you see how this dependency upon the tangible evidence can lead to a state of despair and desperation, or create an attitude of scarcity in our hearts? Please Sir, will you do it for us, again and again? Their statement reflects their sense of scarcity, desperation, blindness to the truth shining brightly in their eyes, entitlement of promise, and a sense that it wouldn't be fair if God didn't show up in the way they wanted or expected.

Sometimes this mentality shows up in our conversations with God, when we approach God with wishful thinking, asking "What will God do for me now?". Despite all the blessings that God has already shared with us, we look to what is next - wanting more.

Living in this way is not a faithful response to God's call to live a life worthy of the living presence of Christ. It can be a start to or spiritual journey, but should not be a comfortable place for us to settle.

Paul instructs us today through his letter to the Ephesians, that we are to actually grow up in our understanding of Christ; we are to connect ourselves to the greater purpose of building up the body in love. Paul asserts the truth that we begin as children in faith, when we need the concrete and tangible, but we aren't called to stay there. We have to grow up and know where we stand, to co-create with God our lives so they are a witness to the power of God's love present, here and now.

For those of you who are reading the *Rule of Benedict: Spirituality in the 21st Century*, you remember the readings this past month when the comment was, "Grow you must!". Joan Chittister's commentary speaks about the connection between the physical and tangible changes for there to be real value in the change. She says, "It is so easy to make cosmetic changes in the name of religion. It is so easy to make up rules and keep them so we can feel good about doing something measureable in our spiritual life. We can fast and fast and fast from food or drink and nothing changes because fasting from food is not what we need at the moment to turn our hearts of stone to hearts of flesh. We can kneel and kneel and kneel but nothing changes because kneeling is not what we need to soften our souls just then. We can fast and kneel and tithe, and nothing changes because we do not really want anything to change. Growth is not an accident. Growth is a process. We have to want to grow. We have to have the will to move away the stones that entomb us in ourselves. We have to work at uprooting the weeds that are smothering good growth in ourselves.

Jesus addresses this very issue with the disciples in our gospel today when they ask about doing the work of God. Jesus is clear that to do the work of God you must be united with God. All sorts of good works are still good, but they aren't the work of God until you

believe in him. The disciples can only do the good works of God if they are connected to Jesus' identity and mission. The exterior work needs to be connected to the interior spiritual union with the holy.

It's the both/and again. To fully love and serve the Lord, we need to offer our love in tangible ways **and** strengthen our spiritual lives.

So, why do this work of growing spiritually? Why explore new ideas? Why burrow down deeply into our understanding of salvation or what Easter means to us? Or why try to find new ways to pray or offer our service to others?

Because when we do, we experience joy.

Joy is actually the fruit of spiritual maturity; joy that shows up in our desire to be attached to some purpose larger than ourselves; joy that shows up in our being loving and patient toward one another, joy that shows up in our desire to play our part alongside one another to build up this part of Christ's body; joy that shows up in helping to carry the burden of others; It's a glorious and joyful thing we can do for one another and which we can become. For when we show joy, we are inviting others to taste and see that the Lord is good. And that's letting God's grace into the world. May we claim and live into the joy God desires for us and is available to us right now.

Amen.