**August 16, 2015 The Rev. Carenda Baker**

**13th Sunday after Pentecost John 6:56-69**

“The Skin Horse had lived longer in the nursery than any of the others. He was so old that his brown coat was bald in patches and showed the seams underneath, and most of the hairs in his tail had been pulled out to string bead necklaces. He was wise, for he had seen a long succession of mechanical toys arrive to boast and swagger, and by-and-by break their mainsprings and pass away, and he knew that they were only toys, and would never turn into anything else. For nursery magic is very strange and wonderful, and only those playthings that are old and wise and experienced like the Skin Horse understand all about it.

“What is REAL?” asked the [Velveteen] Rabbit one day, when they were lying side by side near the nursery fender, before Nana came to tidy the room. “Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick-out handle?”

“Real isn’t how you are made,” said the Skin Horse. “It’s a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real.”

“Does it hurt?” asked the Rabbit.

“Sometimes,” said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. “When you are Real you don’t mind being hurt.”

“Does it happen all at once, like being wound up,” he asked, “or bit by bit?”

“It doesn’t happen all at once,” said the Skin Horse. “You become. It takes a long time. That’s why it doesn’t often happen to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don’t matter at all, because once you are Real you can’t be ugly, except to people who don’t understand.”

* From the *Velveteen Rabbit* by Margery Williams

What does it mean to become ***“REAL”*** as a human being – fully human, fully alive as God intended? What comes to my mind first are the qualities of authentic living, and they all relate to freedom. Being free of ego. Free of needing to judge others. Free of pretense and arrogance. Free of selfishness. Free of fear. Free of isolation.

How does it happen? By taking risks to love, walking in faith, trusting in the goodness and vastness of God’s love at work in us. But precisely because we are human, the road to becoming “real” will also be paved with disappointment, dullness and lack of understanding, willfulness, failure, betrayal, grasping for those things we think will set us apart as better, as special.

To become “real”, to live a real life - takes a lot of effort. It’s not easy and it can be exhausting. It doesn’t happen quickly, and it’s not convenient. We don’t usually understand what it takes to become “real”. To become “real” will cost us something.

Today’s gospel passage concludes our 5-week marathon of reading through John, chapter 6. It started with the miracle of Jesus providing supper for 5,000 from 5 loaves and 2 fish. There were reminders along the way that God has always been in the feeding business, the prime example for the people of Israel being God’s providing daily manna for them while they wandered in the wilderness. “Manna” means literally, “What is it?” When Jesus calls himself the bread of life come down from heaven, I imagine his listeners murmuring: “What is this? He’s saying he is the bread that will give us eternal life? We’re supposed to eat his body and drink his blood?” There has been disbelief, discourse and dialogue all along the way in John, chapter 6. In this last portion of the chapter, finally someone has the courage to say what most of Jesus’ followers were probably thinking and feeling: ***“This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?”*** If we’re honest, we’ve asked the same thing about following Jesus at some point in life.

The curious and casual have now dropped out. Only serious seekers are still following, but they don’t understand what Jesus is saying. They have as many doubts and questions as the ones who have decided they cannot follow any longer. The ones remaining begin to complain and Jesus says, ***“Does this offend you?”*** – meaning all that he has been saying about himself.

Why, yes Lord, since you asked – it does offend us. “Offend” here in the Greek is the word *scandalizo* – scandalize. We are scandalized by what you’re saying to us – that we are supposed to eat your flesh and drink your blood to find life. We are somehow to take all of who you are into ourselves. It’s not surprising that Jesus turns to those who have chosen to remain, the 12 disciples, with the question – ***“Do you also wish to go away?”***

The scandal of Christianity is that Jesus became a real, flesh and blood human being, and then ascended to the cross where his body was broken, and blood flowed from his hands, feet, and side. The scandal is recognizing that only God could and does provide what we need, only God can bring life out of death. This is God’s way of finally setting things right in the world. This way of Jesus is a mysterious and hard way. Two thousand years has not made this “scandal of particularity” any easier to accept.

English writer and lay theologian G.K. Chesterton once said: “The problem with Christianity is not that it has been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult and not tried.”

***Do you also wish to go away?***  It is Peter who answers Jesus’ question. The question speaks to the reality of how hard this way is. There is a real temptation to turn back to the old, familiar and comfortable life, to quit seeking something different, better, and real.***“Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life”.***

Peter and the eleven who remained were plagued by doubt and fear; they suffered at times from an overabundance of pride and a lack of courage, and they deserted Jesus when he needed them most. They weren’t smarter, or more faithful or courageous, or any better than those who dropped out. They weren’t any better than us, and we aren’t much different from them.

Yet at some level, Peter knew where to look for what was real. He looked to the place, to the One in whom he found the most genuine and authentic, rich and full life. Once you’ve entered into relationship with Jesus, opened yourself to relationship with God, the Holy One, you’re changed for life. It’s so hard to move forward, but it also seems impossible to go back. It becomes too hard to accept anything less than living with the One who is REAL, the One who freely offers all that is life-giving – offers more goodness, abundance, and love than we could ever imagine or ask for.

Entering into REAL relationship means belonging, intimacy, desire, mutuality, nurture, and safety. Real relationships are places and spaces of knowing and being known. Real relationships are places of vulnerability – holding both the possibility of deep intimacy and truth telling, as well as the potential for deeply hurting or being hurt by another. Real relationship is what God desires for us and from us.

One major key to finding this real relationship with God through Christ which John’s gospel offers us is the practice of ***ABIDING.***  At least 30 times John uses the word *abide or abiding*. ***Abide*** – it means “to stay with”, to remain. Learning to abide is about allowing the Spirit to teach us, which Jesus had to learn as a human being, how to live and walk through the full spectrum of life’s tensions – hanging in there with God while God continues to stay with and hold onto us, loving us for now and always. We know full well the spectrum of living in these tensions: between fear and love; despair and hope; suffering and compassion; brokenness and healing; sickness and health; sin and forgiveness; death and life.

So what does this *practice of ABIDING* look like? When we read and study Scripture we are learning to abide. When we receive the Eucharist, we are learning to abide. When we pray and engage in meditation, we are learning to abide. When we baptize someone into the body of Christ, and when we remember our own baptism and give thanks, we are learning to abide. When we follow a “rule of life”, a guide to intentional and faithful living, we are learning to abide. When we serve others, we are learning to abide. When we tell someone how we see God at work in the world, we are learning to abide. When we hold all of life gratefully and lightly, rather than trying to control it tightly and possessively, we are learning to abide.

***We are intended to learn this practice of abiding in community with others.*** Those of us who have been reading Joan Chittister’s book about the Rule of St. Benedict are coming to understand this a bit better. The call to discipleship is too hard to attempt on our own. Following Jesus was never intended to be an isolated, individualistic pursuit. In the baptismal covenant, after we affirm what we believe about God as Creator of heaven and earth, Jesus Gods’ Son, and the work of the Holy Spirit - we make promises about ABIDING IN GOD as part of the community of Christ’s Body. Promises to continue the holy practices of worship, study and fellowship; to persevere in resisting evil; to seek to serve Christ by loving our neighbor as our self; to strive for justice and peace and to respect the dignity of every human being.

Why would we settle for life that is not REAL LIFE? It may seem easier and more comfortable, but it is not better. ***“Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.”*** Take the hand of another then, and let us together move forward on this hard, life-giving way. It will be exhausting and exhilarating. It will be full – of prayer, possibility, and the promise of Holy presence. This is our way, the way of Jesus, the way to transformed and abundant, never-ending life. It is the way Jesus has shown us to become FULLY HUMAN AND FULLY ALIVE. And it is the way to God’s glory.