

Sermon for 15 August 2021 @ Bethesda UMC/Baltimore 21214

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

Scriptures: 1 Kings 2:10-12; 3:3-24; Psalm 111(UM832); Ephesians 5:15-20; John 6:51-58

“Brass tacks”

Don't you wish Jesus, or John, or whoever wrote today's Gospel in the early church, had backed off a little about bread and flesh and eating and drinking ?

Fred Craddock emphasizes how we're all heart in modern religious talk, and we forget how people in ancient times took other parts of the body as good descriptive elements for serious meaning: bone, breath, flesh, marrow, joints, and stomach. We know how the human frame is affected by all sorts of experiences, but we hesitate to specify, more than our ancestors did. The point for today is to remember the New testament knows no deeper illustration of fellowship than eating together. Before we even get into the details of what we call Holy Communion, or Eucharist...right about now we know in our bones how we miss that, and need it. "Whoever has removed eating from the list of profoundly religious acts will have difficulty with our Gospel for today," as Craddock puts it. Maybe it's time to start plans for sharing a meal with the other church, for instance. Sometimes, if we pray for something long enough, a way for it to happen comes about, and then our moment to say "yes" and cooperate with God's answer is alive and open to discuss.

When Jesus wants to get serious, he uses such fundamental connections, and we're @ that point today between those who hang back, and those who join; between those who hold tight to the words and customs of their upbringing Specifically the religious leaders of Judaism ... and those who come from other backgrounds or even non-religious traditions and don't have so much trouble joining a new thing. All this was going on in the Jesus movement, just as it is today.

The plain fact is that Christian faith and community were a new spiritual development in the history of humankind, and they came alive @ a moment when such energy could prosper and expand because their result was so desperately needed. Like a marriage, or a birth, what we are a part of, what we experience each Sunday ,and in all our times worshipping, alone joins nature and thought, and results in fresh directions both privately and en masse. This is its essence, unique and genuine. Committing to it ... to Jesus as the Christ ... works, and backing off from it, or breaking off over varieties in it, misses the point. That, as I see it, is the impact of this tough, literal stance on Jesus' part, over the crucial significance of his actual physical body. Commitment as he describes and demonstrates it with his very being, his life, is the fact that cannot be avoided. Joining is a new creation, with heaven and earth working together.

In the other major theme from today's readings, the story of David's son Solomon offers a rich source for reflection as we roll it out this season.. One scholar suggests this whole saga of David's line and God's covenant with him, with it, is the Jews' reflection on what finally brought down Israel and produced their miserable captivity in Babylon. God endowed Solomon with wisdom Which included humility, as we see in his prayer today for his reign, which God liked.

Beautiful as Wisdom is, feminine in its integrity, receptive and tender and humble in her total being, she nevertheless can be brushed aside by earthly power Rulers who allowed their patriarchy, their overbearing maleness, to take over rather than cooperating with God, short-circuited the spread of wholeness among the people of Israel. David and his descendants play out what we see and know goes on among us now, and thus give us insight, even as they illustrate how generous God is with talents, how hopeful God is again and again and again. Just that kind of interaction is going on still ... and we are called to try fresh solutions as the Spirit gives us insight and patience to love our neighbor as ourselves. How much needs fixing in our current set-up, and what seemingly small but actually critical things we can do, to help the Lord produce a better society, with healthier customs and weather patterns and health measures and educational opportunities and On and on it goes.

How can we make these two themes practical, as I imply in my sermon title, 'Brass tacks,' as in "getting down to brass tacks"...?

How do we hope if we don't get going? On the other hand, how do I learn to control myself unless I admit I need help, and must never stop learning better behavior, adopting more forgiving thought patterns, and trusting beyond my own resources? Jesus Christ is the center, or I am nothing. Cooperation is the only sensible attitude, as I never stop learning. We are not alone. Our thoughts and impulses are subject to God Spirit at work in us, and our listening and changing direction when that becomes clear to us are essential.

Right now some delightful energy is springing up in our own church. I could even say the source of it is strongly feminine. Can we cooperate, and expand its influence, week by week and individual issue by individual issue?

The Letter to the Ephesians gets earthy today: "Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time because the days are evil." Watching our tongues, forgiving goof-ups in ourselves and our fellow human beings, as well as our non-human companions and all the variety of beings that we are now beginning to realize are so fundamental to our survival.

The Christian life is an adventure, don't you think? We never finish learning. Surprised by joy is not a bad motto for the whole show, because of the tenderness at the heart of things.

Get to work. Leave space for peace and rest. Allow more room for your soul, and watch for fresh ways to give, and to trust, and to be creative with your own mind and body.

"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have a good understanding."

"...I am only a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in."

"The one who eats this bread will live forever." Amen.

