

Sermon – St. Paul’s in Nantucket

The Reverend Canon James G. Callaway, D.D.
General Secretary, COLLEGES & UNIVERSITIES OF THE ANGLICAN COMMUNION
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Lord, we seek to be in your presence, to be your friend.
Guide us by your Spirit and keep us in your kingdom. *Amen*

Jesus said, I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.

This summer the world’s attention turned to the fate of the thirteen young Wild Boars soccer players trapped in the Tham Luang Cave in Thailand after a flash flood sent waters rising nearly ten feet in less than an hour.

The boy’s coach, Ekkapol Ake Chantawong, helped the trapped soccer players, ages eleven to fourteen, to cope using mediation techniques honed from his years as a Buddhist monk. While it is agreed that it was a dangerous place they shouldn’t have gone, the story that emerged is of the calm solidarity of the eleven Wild Boars teammates and their twenty-five year old coach, called Ake, who when orphaned had spent ten years as a monk. Ake kept the boys together and taught them to mediate to stay strong as they survived licking the moisture from the limestone walls.

Whether or not you have ever gone spelunking, we all know about circumstances that have left us trapped and isolated. It can be absolute despair. Fortunately, we also have had experiences of getting through them. The Thai Buddhist

tradition served these young guys well, endowing them with spiritual strengths to survive together. What about us? How much do we turn to our tradition as Christians for spiritual strength?

This morning's Gospel points the way, but first we have some ground to cover. Did this morning's reading sound a bit familiar? Did you have a premonition that Deacon Susan might have opened to the wrong page and reread the text from last week? (Not that Deacon Susan isn't quite careful.) Actually, while she correctly read this morning's passage, the two passages of John 6.35-50 and 6.51-58 are almost mirror images of each other, with a significant difference we need to notice.

Last week's passage opens with Jesus statement, "I am the bread of life, the one who comes to me will not hunger and the one who believes in me shall never thirst." This is the basic message of Jesus' proclamation that God's kingdom has begun to dawn on earth, here and now. As Father Wolf reminded in last week's sermon, the Gospel is the opening of eternal life as being about me than just life after death, but about sharing in the resurrection of Jesus in the abundance of life now. Quoting his Mom's motto in her work in elder affairs: "Not only more years to our life, but more life in our years." Eternal life is more than a pie in the sky, but starts with living differently now.

One who came to Jesus in John's Gospel was Nicodemus, the Pharisee who came under the cover of night in John 3 to

learn for himself more about Jesus and this new life: “Truly, truly I say to you,’ Jesus admonished, “unless one is born anew, he cannot see the Kingdom of God: that which is born of the flesh is flesh and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.”

What is it then to live in the Spirit? For most of us, it starts with letting go: not devising and imposing our solutions, but being attentive to the Spirit’s bidding and path to follow. For example, at some point the boys in the cave had to stop exhausting themselves trying to dig themselves out and focus on staying together well. How many times have you had to abandon your own frantic solution to being open to discovering another, better, even gifted way? Jesus is the bread, the staff of life that takes us to this different reality of God’s Kingdom that literally can unfold before us.

Now, we are at the hinge between these passages that despite being parallel are dramatically different. In today’s Gospel, Jesus’ statement is “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.” In a dramatic shift that is similar to the two parts of our Sunday service, John’s Gospel now has moved from the Ministry of the Word to the Ministry of the Sacrament. As the consummate twentieth century Johannine commentator, Fr. Raymond Brown wrote:

The difference between the two passages is the Lord’s Supper, which mysteriously is not included in the Gospel of John, The

Synoptics (Matthew, Mark and Luke) have accounts of the Last Supper, while the Gospel of John has this detailed Eucharistic theology.

Remember, what we have as the written Gospels started as the testimony of Jesus' followers, which as they started dying-off became oral traditions. Scholars hold that Mark is probably the earliest Gospel, which is pretty straightforward narrative, while John is the latest, which accounts for its most developed theological interpretation.

How dramatic the difference is between the two becomes clearer when we recognize that in the earlier passage Jesus' saying that he was "the Bread of life" would be intelligible to his listeners, while the admonition "to eat my flesh, other than in the context of the Last Supper it wouldn't have made any sense to them at all. So this has to be the case of later Johannine theology being added in Jesus' voice to interpret the gift of the post-resurrection gift of the Eucharist.

"I am the living bread that comes down from heaven. Whoever eats this of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."

For Christians, the Eucharist is the spiritual center point that incorporates us into Jesus' life. Defying theological attempts to describe it precisely, we believe that in eating the bread and drinking the wine Jesus is really present with us. Thank goodness, it is a gift that does not need to be understood to be received.

To better recognize this “living bread” I want to focus on two elements of the Eucharist service. First is the Offertory. While we think of passing the plate as a means of supporting the church and Christian ministry, as usual our money has a larger significance. It actually has a highly symbolic function: we spend our money on things we need, on things we want and on behalf of people and things we care about. At the Offertory, whatever gift we make represents giving ourselves to God, symbolically placing our selves on the altar with the gifts of bread and wine. In the prayer of consecration they become changed by Jesus’ presence, so that when in the Communion when we receive the bread and wine we take our very selves back, renewed and cleansed by Christ’s presence.

The sixth chapter of John in these two similar passages opens with Jesus’ proclaiming in his teaching: “I am the bread of life,” then progresses to his saying, “I am the living bread that came down from heaven,” moving from his proclamation to the gift of the resurrection to his followers in the Eucharist.

Why did Jesus do all of this? His calling comes at the conclusion of his remarkable conversation with Nicodemus in these familiar words: “God so loved the world that he gave his Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life.”

Living Eucharistically is to be loved as Christ’s daughters and sons that we might share this love in our lives with

others. We are living in Christ when we see another person not through our own human eyes and expectations, but as God sees them, whatever their immediate limitations, needs and failings. In this coming week, be on the alert to noticing Eucharistic moments: stopping to pay attention, listening instead of judging, understanding, helping and caring can all be part. While our agenda can be to accomplish five things, listening to the Spirit may show things that are much more important.

Our basic spiritual centering does not come from entering a monastery, but from being part of a Eucharistic community that keeps the Lord's Day and accepting and returning the gift of Eucharistic living. Nothing less is our tradition and our calling.