

“Not Knowledge to Grasp; but Relationship Embraced”

John 6: 51-58 - Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost – August 16, 2015

Pastor Deb Birkeland – Christ the King Lutheran Church

A frail old man went to live with his son, daughter-in-law, and four-year-old grandson. The old man's hands trembled, his eyesight was blurred, and his step faltered. The family ate together at the table. But the elderly grandfather's shaky hands and failing sight made eating difficult. Peas rolled off his spoon onto the floor. When he grasped the glass, milk spilled on the tablecloth. The son and daughter-in-law became irritated with the mess. 'We must do something about father,' said the son. 'I've had enough of his spilled milk, noisy eating, and food on the floor.' So the husband and wife set a small table in the corner. There, Grandfather ate alone while the rest of the family enjoyed dinner. Since Grandfather had broken a dish or two, his food was served in a wooden bowl.

When the family glanced in Grandfather's direction, sometimes he had a tear in his eye as he sat alone. Still, the only words the couple had for him were sharp admonitions when he dropped a fork or spilled food. The four-year-old watched it all in silence.

One evening before supper, the father noticed his son playing with wood scraps on the floor. He asked the child sweetly, 'What are you making?' Just as sweetly, the boy responded, 'Oh, I am making a little bowl for you and Mama to eat your food in when I grow up.' The four-year-old smiled and went back to work. The words so struck the parents so that they were speechless. Then tears started to stream down their cheeks. Though no word was spoken, both knew what must be done.

That evening the husband took Grandfather's hand and gently led him back to the family table. For the remainder of his days he ate every meal with the family. And for some reason, neither husband nor wife seemed to care any longer when a fork was dropped, milk spilled, or the tablecloth soiled.

I have a four year old grandson, and I am often amazed as his awareness and ability to name truth around him. Yet, at the same time, I notice that Cooper has an uncanny ability to look past the imperfections of the adults and simply run into their arms with unconditional love. Somehow, in his four year old heart, relationship is more

important than knowledge. He loves us first...tries to understand us second.

Life is often shaped by a series of lessons to be learned. We all mess up; we know that well. Emotional maturity grows through self-knowledge and shapes our values and actions as we learn life's lessons. So, knowledge IS important, but there is something even more important than knowledge...something God gave to us from the very beginning of creation when he warned Adam and Eve not to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Something that now only Jesus can fully restore.

Today, we continue this long discourse in John's gospel about Jesus, the bread of life. As the Jews are trying to "digest" what Jesus is saying, they begin to quarrel among themselves. "Who IS this man who gives us his flesh to eat?" They want an explanation because knowledge is safe, and gives power. It sets boundaries and creates lines of authority. But, knowledge is NOT what Jesus is offering here, it is RELATIONSHIP. Jesus is giving his whole self for the sake of the world, and that isn't easy to explain. If we approach that news as knowledge to be grasped, it is truly beyond the scope of human understanding. Who would do such a thing? Why? How? Flesh broken, blood poured out, wasted, sacrificed, agony beyond description...who can wrap their mind around this?

Jesus is sharing more than information here. He is sharing his very heart! Coming to eat...crunching and munching...now moves to consuming. Taste and see (explore); then Eat and drink...(embrace ALL of me as I embrace ALL of you.) What Jesus is saying here is that eternal life can't be understood, only embraced. IT IS BEING IN CLOSE COMMUNION WITH GOD THROUGH THE HEART OF JESUS. Jesus invites us to be as intimate with him as He is with the Father. In communion then, Jesus moves us closer to the very life of God...a life that is beyond knowledge and cloaked forever in RELATIONSHIP. A life that we can have right now.

I was struck by a true story I read this week written by a forty year old woman who lives in Los Angeles. One Friday afternoon, this woman named Stephanie, was driving the California freeways from Los Angeles to Palm Springs. Traffic was heavy and moving fast. At the outskirts of LA, the cars in front of her were coming to a stand-still. As she came to a stop behind a long line of cars, she glanced in her rear-view mirror and realized that the driver behind her was distracted and not stopping. In fact, he was

hurling toward her with tremendous speed. In a heartbeat, she realized that she was going to be hit, and hit hard. Given his speed and the fact that she was nose to rear with the car in front of her, the grave danger she was in told her that she might die.

"I looked down at my hands clenching the steering wheel," she said. "I hadn't consciously tightened them; this was my natural state...how I lived life. In that split second, I decided that I did not want to live that way, nor did I want to die that way. I closed my eyes, took a breath, and dropped my hands to my side. I let go. I surrendered to life and to death. Then, I was hit by a tremendous force."

When Stephanie opened her eyes, she was fine. The car in front was wrecked, the car behind was demolished and her car was compacted like an accordion. The police told her that she was lucky she had relaxed, for muscle tension increases the likelihood of severe injury. She walked away from that accident feeling that she had been given a tremendous gift. Yet the gift wasn't just that she had survived unhurt, it was greater than that. Stephanie said, "I saw in that moment how I had been living my life for years, and was given many opportunities to change. Trying to control myself and everything around me, I had chosen to grab life with a clenched fist. But now, I realized that I could hold life in my open hand, as if it were a feather resting on my palm. I realized that if I could relax enough to release my fear in the face of death I could now truly enjoy life, and connect with myself; with God and with others just as I authentically am.

On the edge of life, Stephanie learned a lesson – not about death, but about life and living.* Deep inside, we all know there is someone we were meant to be. We feel connected and alive when we claim that authenticity. The reverse is also true. We know when something is off...when our quest for meaning gets bogged down in fear, guilt, or a need for power and control. Consciously or not, we all strive for answers to life's questions. We all seek the lessons life can teach us to find ourselves on a path that leads us somewhere we know ultimately as home. What if that place we seek is not just a place, but a person? What if letting go and surrendering the demands of perfect knowledge for a relationship in which we can trust the mysteries of loss, and brokenness, pain, injustice, and even death can be held lightly, like a feather in our palm? For they are NOT the most important thing. The pearl of great price...that which we would sell

everything to gain is NOT knowledge that understands and thus controls all things. It is the bread of life that comes down from heaven as a real person and gives ALL of himself so that we might have ALL of God.

In vs. 54-56 – John describes what participation in a full relationship with God looks like. Vs. 54: Who ever eats and drinks (embraces all of me) has eternal life...resurrection on the last day. Vs: 56 – Who ever eats and drinks (embraces all of me) abides in Jesus, and Jesus abides in them. And Vs: 57 – Who ever eats and drinks (embraces all of me) Lives right now and forever, for life in abundance comes within a relationship with the Father.

What does that mean for us today? As a church, it means we “proclaim” Jesus rather than “explain” Jesus. Paul writes in Ephesians that this means we gather, singing songs, and praising God as a siren call of hope into a burdened culture. We make the most of our precious time together, for as days in this world are evil; our time within it is abundant and full of promise found in a relationship with goodness that will prevail. Like lady Wisdom in our Proverbs text, we are equipped to set the table that offers intimacy and understanding. Together, in relationship, we open hearts to come, taste and see; eat and drink, and live. This is what it means to be the body of Christ offering the body and blood of Christ for the sake of the world.

And as Stephanie’s story illustrates, we must learn we cannot hold life with a clenched fist, and neither can we capture God with grabbing hands. We are to hold his love lightly in the palm of our hand so that it can be shared...given away, eaten, poured out, consumed and fully embraced by those hungry and desperate.

Like a little four year old, we learn and gain knowledge, but ultimately we love unconditionally. We love because we are loved. We invite because we ourselves have been invited, and we feed the hearts of those seeking life with the true bread that comes from Heaven.

It means we literally offer the “heart” of Jesus...the person he TRULY IS. How do we do this? Love is best shown by showing up for one another, “being there” even in the terrors of the night, so that as Jesus abides in us, HE is there, offering to abide in another too. Nutritionally, our bodies literally become the food we eat; and spiritually, our spirits literally radiate God’s grace when we abide in the one whose love is stronger

than knowledge...and closer than our breath.

Let me paint a mental picture of what such abiding might look like. A hospital chaplain was doing rounds and stopped in to see 79 year old Lorraine who had been diagnosed with terminal cancer. Her family was with her, but despite the grim outlook, the chaplain noticed how happy and relaxed they seemed as they surrounded their loved one. He asked if he could stop by later. "Sure," she said "I love visitors!" When he came back, he was taken back. Lorraine had turned on some music and was dancing around the room as if there were no tomorrow. Lorraine smiled at him and kept on shimmying to the music. "Whatcha doing there?" I asked. "The watusi!" She replied. "And why are you doing the watusi?" I asked. "Because I can!" she exclaimed!*

Why do we eat and drink? Because we can! Why do we sing and praise God? Because we can! Why do we find joy in all circumstances, even in the shadow of the valley of death! Because we can! This dancing one is WHO Jesus truly is... take and eat, and live. Amen.

* Stories found in David Kessler's book, Life Lessons, Scribner publishers, New York, 2014