

Lectionary 21B

August 25, 2024

Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood

Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18; Psalm 34:15-22; Ephesians 6:10-20; John 6:56-69

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from our God: Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.

Some things are difficult to hear - literally: the shrill squeal of a violin in the hands of that eight year old for the first time; the neighbor's chain saw at 6 a.m. on a Saturday morning - your only morning to sleep in, of course; nails on a chalkboard; emergency sirens; heavy metal music (ok, not difficult for all of us!). The decibels or pitch just do not fall into the comfort zone of our ears.

Some things are difficult to hear figuratively: "*are we there yet*" just minutes into that long drive (and over and over again); "*your call is important to us*" (followed by some lovely music and a 20 minute wait for a customer service representative); the demands of your neediest neighbor, your grouchiest colleague, your spendthrift in-law. The volume is OK, but the message is a source of annoyance.

And we dare not go into all the political name-calling and opposing truths that are coming full force in this presidential election year. Some candidates have nothing good to say about anyone, or at least each other; some statements are way out in left field and far from the truth; and some claim to be the one and only solution to all our problems and promise immediate results. Makes one want to mute the news, turn off the talk shows and not answer the phone.

Sometimes, however, things are difficult to hear not because they are annoying, or loud, or rude, or less than accurate. Some things are difficult to hear because they are not what we *want* to hear. They are both true and hard to understand. They hurt us deeply, emotionally: cancer...conflict...corruption; divorce...death...disease; war... weapons...wild storms. These words disrupt our lives; they send us into a new place, a place of fear and worry; and they remind us all too vividly, that not only are there many things we do not

understand, but there are also many things we cannot control and cannot avoid facing.

This is the issue today for Jesus' disciples. No longer is he speaking with the admiring crowds who came for the free lunch and unexpected healings. No longer is he speaking with the temple teachers and leaders, traditionalists all, who cannot get past either the literal challenge of his words about flesh and blood or the spiritual one of claiming not only to be one with God but actually be God, and the source of eternal life. Today he is speaking with followers, his disciples, those closest to him, the ones who know him better than any others. He is speaking to us.

It is the content of his premise that disturbs, not the tone of his voice. It is the not-understanding that confuses, not the clearly articulated words. It is the lack of control over things that rankles more. Ultimately, it is the difficult and perhaps impossible challenge of believing and following Jesus anyway, in spite of that content and confusion and lack of control. It is this hard news that has folks tiptoeing out the back door of the temple and saying thanks, but no thanks.

Today we are no longer offended by the language of flesh and blood, so tamely presented in small wafers or tasty pita bread, and sweet wine or grape juice. We know we find Jesus *in, with, and under* those things as Luther would explain. This side of the resurrection we are not often amazed at the permeable line between life and death when Jesus is involved...at least, so long as we don't have to try to explain it to someone who has never even heard of him.

Then again some things just defy explanation. Sara Miles had lived a totally secular life when she walked into St. Gregory of Nyssa Episcopal Church in San Francisco at the age of 46. A journalist and atheist, she thought of regular church goers as religious nuts, and was mostly aware of the very non-Christian activities of church goers in the news: hypocrisy, abuse, exclusions. For some inexplicable reason, she stopped, stayed for worship, and joined the congregants in walking to the altar for communion, and was overwhelmed by

the presence she felt in receiving the bread and wine. She was so overwhelmed that she was moved to tears, and moved to return again and again for more, with all her questions and history and doubts, moved to acknowledge Jesus and the power of communion with God lodged in her consciousness.

Indeed, it may not happen so deeply every time but indeed it does happen to each of us that we are moved by the act of communion and of worship. I can still remember my first Communion, a line of second graders walking through the grotto to the gothic style Roman Catholic Church of my childhood: girls in veils and white dresses, boys in suits and ties; the pomp and splendor of the moment, the organ music and choir singing stilled as all those young eyes focused on the lifting of the host and the cup. It remains for me to this day a powerful moment.

Communion is meant to be life giving, meant to waken us to God's presence, meant to call us back again and again, meant to be more than can be explained.

Like the crowds at the miraculous feeding of the 5,000, it's easy to be excited by the big events, the joyous occasions, the perfect outcomes. And like the temple elders, we like having rules and directions, something to guide us through - at least as long as they agree with our understanding of things. We are used to being in control, used to pulling ourselves up by the bootstraps, and committed to arranging things "correctly".

But sadness and pain show up in life no matter how good we are. Ho-hum, boring days arrive and joy is dulled into habit. The rules pinch, the directions are hard to live up to, and everyone else seems to be getting along just fine without worrying about doing the right thing. And even when we do our best to control all the variables, there are no perfect families, no perfect jobs, no perfect neighborhoods, and no perfect lives. And so we wonder.

The road that Jesus walked is harder than we imagined. Those others we are supposed to love aren't always so loveable, the words we are supposed to share are not always well received, and the good we are called to do for the world means some other good - good for us - can't happen. We struggle just as

the first followers did with the challenge. Slipping out the back door when no one is looking seems tempting.

Do you also wish to go away?

That is the million dollar question, so to speak. It is the question that we will face over and over in our life of faith.

Is it too hard to trust? Even the five thousand who were fed got hungry again, and put space between themselves and the miracle, needing more miracles, more proof in order to believe.

Is it too long to wait? A day? A week? A lifetime? The joyful times seem to fly by, but the times of struggle? Well, they seem to last forever!

Is it too hard to understand? The American humorist, Mark Twain, once said about the bible, *The more you explain it, the more I don't understand it.*

Is it too hard to accept...Twain also said, *It ain't those parts of the Bible that I can't understand that bother me, it is the parts that I do understand.* Maybe it's just too difficult to accept God's unconditional love and forgiveness: after all, we can't seem to come anywhere close to matching that!

But you see, God has come to us, and here we are.

God has called us, and here we are.

God has loved us, and here we are.

God welcomes our prayers just as a mom welcomes her child's first efforts on that squeaky instrument. God answers our questions over and over again along the way, even when the wait seems long and the ride interminable. God listens to our rants and complaints, even as God reminds us to dig deeper for compassion, for the ability to see the log in our own eye rather than accusing another.

And God is an all-weather presence: in joy and sorrow, peace and unrest, easy sailing and rough waters. The back door is never locked, and reentry is always welcome. Even when the twelve disciples who stayed for that temple talk in

Capernaum strayed from the path again and again, tried to best each other and claim the best seats in heaven, complained about the children and the riff raff, denied knowing Jesus and ran from the cross – even then, Jesus was waiting for them, and in fact came to them with open arms.

What's left for us is to choose to keep our eyes open, choose to see what is so beautifully laid before us, choose to allow God's word and God's love to live in our hearts and minds and bodies no matter what.

And to top it off, God enables us to choose.

Sara Miles founded the Food Pantry at that Episcopal church that offered her that first communion. She recruited volunteers, stocked shelves, served guests, and raised money, enough to open food pantries across San Francisco. She shared and shares still her story and her faith at conventions and retreats and church gatherings.

*I was, as the prophet said, hungering and thirsting for righteousness. I found it at the eternal and material core of Christianity: body, blood, bread, wine, poured out freely, shared by all. I discovered a religion rooted in the most ordinary yet subversive practice: a dinner table where everyone is welcome, where the despised and outcasts are honored.**

Fed and faithful.

Fed and forgiven.

Fed and feeding others.

This is the gift we receive - the unexplainable gift from God - to find life now and beyond, to experience love now and beyond, to share that love now and beyond because God lives and loves and shares now. And always.

May you hear the music of God's love today:

through loudness, through annoyances, through bragging and bashing, through fears and worries, through doubts and questions.

May you be fed with the bread and wine that is Jesus and allow him to live in you as you live and grow and love through him. Amen.

**Miles, Sara. Take This Bread . Random House Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.*