Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost All Saints’ Church

August 5, 2018 Proper 13 Year B

Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15 Ephesians 4:1-16

Psalm 78:23-29 John 6:24-35

Thank you, dear Lord, for giving us the Bread of Life. AMEN

We are the crowd- or very like them- that hovers around Jesus in today’s gospel. They are hungry, and hunger terrifies them. It terrifies everyone. They want to be fed. They want bread.

“Give us bread, Jesus. And also heal the spiritual hunger we have as well. Take care of us. We are afraid. We need you.”

I love this crowd. To name real needs and fears takes courage. First of all, we become vulnerable by naming our needs and fears, but we can also become further afraid because now after naming our real concerns, these needs might not be met, or our fears relieved. Anxiety can build. Fear can multiply. “Why in the world did I let people see the real me? It’s not worth the risk.”

Sometimes I think the fear of revealing ourselves becomes so palpable, we find ways to hide. One way to hide is to get busy with things that are not at our core- that really aren’t in the depths of our heart. We create shadows of ourselves, obsessing about other things, and then get busy feeding “what’s not real” sometimes by acquiring things- money, security, affirmation, success, and an “identity” that we think will be pleasing and acceptable.

This past week I received very sad news. One of my students who graduated the same year my daughter Lizzy did, took her own life. News like this is always stunningly upsetting. She was 24, beautiful, an athlete, passionate about teaching and coaching, working in a great school, ½ way through her graduate degree, and as Lizzy says, “she was so kind and funny; it just breaks my heart.”

And of course, the questions that come from her family, from students and colleagues and friends close to her rise up: “What happened? Why? Is there something I could have done? How was I so blind to her pain? How did she get so desperate?”

This is the real hunger. This young adult and her friends and family long to be fed. Jesus knows this. So much pain and hurt and fear. Life is fragile, unpredictable, and sometimes very cruel. Help us dear, Lord.

Our readings are nudging us, pushing us, beckoning us to be Real and to go after the Real. Yes, the price of authenticity is often fear and terror, and we will do almost anything to find some kind of false peace, but our call is to embrace this “one wild and precious life,” (Mary Oliver), that miracle called You, and not to be, as the writer of Ephesians warns us, “tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people’s trickery, by their craftiness, in deceitful scheming” (Ephesians 4:14).

There are no easy answers. We are left in my student’s void, by her void. Gathering together in a chapel, holding each other in the loss, reading a poem or scripture, singing and lighting a candle helps, helps a lot, but it doesn’t answer the real questions about her desperation, about her defeating pain and isolation, about her fixation that somehow the world would be in a better place without her.

If only you had let us know, Dear One, and shared your pain, and reached out, and let us hold you, we could have found a way through it together. You didn’t have to be strong all by yourself.

The day I heard the news, that night I went to see “Won’t You Be My Neighbor?” the documentary on Fred Rogers. Both my daughters grew up with Mr. Rogers and told me, after I raved about the film, that they always felt that Mr. Rogers was talking only to them. He was having a conversation with you and no one else, and he loved you just as you were because he kept telling you that, and that it was ok to be afraid, and confused, and angry, and worried- that he would wait with you and not try to resolve everything. That you could trust him. That you could be real within his neighborhood song:

“It’s you I like, it’s not the things you wear. It’s not the way you do your hair, but it’s you I like. The way you are right now, the way-down-deep inside you. Not the things that hide you. Not the things you do well, they’re just beside you. But it’s you I like. Every part of you. Your skin, your eyes, your feelings. Whether old or new, I hope that you remember, that even when you’re feeling blue, that it’s you I like. It’s you, yourself, it’s you. It’s you I like.”

Such a simple song. We underestimate its power. My student needed its life-giving waters.

Mr. Rogers’ life message of truth, of loving your neighbor and yourself was his way of “speaking the truth in love,” and when we find our way to this truth we, as the writer of Ephesians reminds us, “will be joined and knit together by every ligament” (Ephesians 4:15).

How are we connected in these ways? How can Christ fill us? What do we mean when we say Christ is real, the real food we crave, and all other goals are but just Signs?

Jesus does a simple thing. He invites us to feed on the Bread of Heaven, so that we can become bread for others. We must become bread, ourselves. And we can.

Bread is nourishment, food, to be broken and distributed. Paradoxically, when we are broken, distributed, we are whole and released. We live then out of fullness. This is redemption. This is what the world hungers for. Jesus is showing us the way.

When Mr. Rogers, and when Jesus, says, “it’s you I like,” they are talking about “that part of you that knows that life is far more than anything you can ever see, or hear, or touch. That deep part of you, that allows you to stand for those things, without which humankind cannot survive. Love that conquers hate. Peace that rises triumphant over war. And justice that proves more powerful than greed.” (Except from Fred Rogers commencement speech at Dartmouth, 2002).

Remember, what is essential is invisible to the eye. (*The Little Prince*, Antoine de Saint Exupery).

My friend Joe Duggan was here a couple of weeks ago. An Episcopal priest, once a Jesuit, has lived his life in service. He has a congenital tremor- his hands tremble, especially when he is eating and drinking. His mother had him when she was 48, a miraculous birth, and Joe sees the tremor as a sign and remembrance of that miracle.

And yet his tremor has also been difficult- embarrassing, annoying, even shaming. He was on my porch and we were having a glass of wine, when a bumble bee showed up. A bee, and a glass of wine and a tremor are a bad mix. I grabbed the wine, shooed the bee, all in a relaxed and fluid, take-for-granted, movement. And Joe sighed,

“The tremor is getting worse. There’s this new treatment, with ultra sound, and the doctors think that they can cure the tremor… 100% erase it, actually in a manner of hours. I’m kind of hesitant, though.”

“Why?”

“This body thing, this annoyance, is a visible reminder of the paradoxical beauty of all our imperfections. (He really talks like this). It’s given me patience for the humanity of others and for my humanity to show up… I wait easier, listen and see. Its involuntary nature reminds me of my involuntary fragility. It allows me to get deep. I’m not my tremor, but I’m not my successes either. I’m a wonderful mix of God and man, (we all are) and it’s easy to forget- the tremor reminds me. I don’t want to lose the reminder that takes me back to who I really am.”

We are who we really are when we choose to live within the life-giving-Jesus-bread, which comes in lots of different shapes and sizes, broken and distributed, which is all about having the courage, as Jesus did, to embrace, fully, the inherent poverty of the human condition. In the embrace of that poverty, God reaches in and resurrects us continuously. And that’s where life resides. It’s why Jesus came to show us the way. As fully man, and in his failures and in his dying, he became the Bread of Life. We too can become this bread and feed a world that is desperately hungry. AMEN