

Living as One – August 11, 2024

2 Samuel 18:5-9, 15, 31-33

Psalm 130

Ephesians 4:25-5:2

John 6:35, 41-51

I cannot tell you how wonderful it is to be living in a small mountain town again. On Friday I went to the post office to grab some packages and sign up for a post office box. When our business was concluded, the gentleman who was helping me pulled out a bag of homemade candied pecans. He said a local woman provides them for newcomers, so they feel welcomed. That is not something that happens in the city. You all already know this, it's probably part of the reason you live here, but there's just something special about living in a place like this. I think that, even with all the differences between folks, most people in small towns, especially mountain towns, share a respect for our interdependence. We may be self-sufficient, but we also recognize that we are all connected. And, to a certain degree, any of our individual successes or failures will have some kind of impact on all of us.

In many ways, that is the story of the history of Grace Episcopal Church. I have been reading Phil Palin's book, "A Place Apart," that recounts the stories of this community since its inception. This little church has survived two world wars, repeated economic crises, dramatic political and social challenges, as well as religious changes. And yet, there have always been people who have chosen to live in a sacrificial way to keep these doors open and ensure the ministry of the gospel.

Saint Paul's metaphor of the Body is an apt one for us here today. "We are all members of one another." A body might be a singular thing, but it requires many parts working together

to function. The most striking part of this passage from the letter to the Ephesians is the way Paul directs us to continually be considering the way our behavior impacts others. In Paul's way of thinking, because of our inevitable influence on one another, we must live our lives as if our choices, behaviors, thoughts, and words are as beneficial to one another as to ourselves. He seems to understand that this does not always come naturally or easily because he gives many examples of what to do and what not to do. Ultimately, he provides one clear method to ensure our mutuality. He tells us to imitate God. If we keep our eyes on God, living as Jesus lived, we shouldn't get too far off track.

The idea sounds simple. In reality, though, keeping our eyes on Jesus is some of the hardest work of our lives. We look at the crowds following Jesus and it's easy to think that they were getting it right. They left their homes and tracked Jesus down on the other side of the sea of Galilee, even after he and the disciples were trying to find a quiet place away from them. But those who came after Jesus in this story were not pursuing Jesus because they liked what he said. They wanted the bread he miraculously provided. But when Jesus explained the message of the bread, where it came from, and its intended purpose...which wasn't just to sate their hunger... they lacked the faith to believe. They questioned Jesus and many of them ended up leaving him altogether because they found his message offensive. The first disciples of Jesus suffered the same struggle as the Hebrews wandering in the desert, the same thing we suffer from today. A lack of Belief.

Jesus said that whoever believes has eternal life. He wasn't just talking about a distant afterlife. For Jesus, eternal life was a present reality. "Eternal Life" is life, joy, energy, power for living in and for God, and eternal life begins NOW, here, today. Eternal life has to do with life into eternity but it is no less about what and how we live within the day of our current existence. The Hebrews had to trust God every single day to provide what they needed. God cultivated in them a relationship of trust as they daily went out to harvest the

bread provided to them from heaven. They couldn't grab enough for a week, or it would spoil. They had to take what was available for a single day, every day. Jesus also wants to cultivate a relationship of trust, of belief, with his people. But for Jesus, he wasn't just providing bread, he is the bread. When Jesus says whoever comes to me will never be hungry and whoever believes will never be thirsty, he means that coming to him for our sustenance is the thing that fills us. Our relationship with God, our trust in Jesus to fill our physical and spiritual needs, is the source of eternal life Here, now, today, for us: For the body, which includes those sitting here in this room, and for the life of the world, including all those just outside these doors.

The people who came to Jesus looking for bread wanted the power Jesus held, the ability to make endless bread. They wanted the power to do it so they wouldn't have to trust him to fill them every time they were hungry. They wanted the power for themselves so they could leave and perform the same miracle on their own. Jesus wanted the relationship. He wanted their eyes and hearts fixed on him because he knew the power for living is found in the relationship, not in physical bread. Jesus provides his flesh to us so that we spiritually feed on him for our strength and for the strength of our whole community.

David's Psalm illustrates this kind of devoted focus. Over and over he repeats, "I wait for the lord." He watches for the Lord, he fixes his attention on the Lord, he knows that hoping in God will never be disappointed. In fact, there is nothing else that quenches all the human hunger we feel.

Have any of you been watching the Olympics this year. There has been quite a bit of reporting about the way the competitors are supporting one another. I think it stands in sharp contrast to some of the divisiveness our world is experiencing right now. But competitors are celebrating one another, being outwardly affectionate and joyful over one

another's successes. Even across cultural, racial, religious, political, and competitive lines these young people are demonstrating a profound understanding that humans are linked, and we impact each other in powerful ways, that uplifting one another can impact far more than attempting to hold one another back.

As beautiful as that is, the more natural human condition is not working together. From the earliest stories in our Bibles, we read of murder and dissention. David's family was the same. His son Absalom was so filled with hatred for his father and brother, so consumed with competitive rage, that he was complicit in his family's pain and strife. Living for the benefit of others is just not simple. Of all the beauty of small-town life, we all know the complexity inherent in living lives that overlap, especially when we disagree about the things that matter most deeply to us. Let's be honest, it is an election year.

But we are also Christians, and we are sitting in a building that testifies to the ongoing, powerful, Grace of God. God who continually sustains our common life through feeding on Jesus, looking to Jesus, waiting on the Lord and believing God. And when we consider the fact that we are a single body, individually making choices that impact one another, ultimately impacting the whole body... it's important to remember that the choices we make to regularly feed on Christ, to tend to our own spiritual vitality, will strengthen the whole body. Just as Jesus multiplied the loaves among his followers, we can be part of that same multiplication process.

May we be imitators of God, living in love, and feeding on Jesus, so that we may build up the Lord's Body here at Grace Episcopal Church and throughout Stanardsville to the glory of God.