

Pentecost 12, 8.15.2021

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

Proverbs 9:1-6; Psalm 34:9-14; Ephesians 5:15-20; John 6:51-58

“Abide in Jesus and Live”

*Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.*

Paul’s words today sound remarkably modern and current. In the second reading Paul writes, “*Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil.*” One only needs to turn on the news or open a news app on one’s phone to confirm the presence of evil in the world. We are surrounded by sinfulness, brokenness and illness - all signs of the limitations of our humanity and human community.

Like Paul’s words about being careful how we live and about making the most of our time, daily we have heard guidelines and directives about how to stay healthy and help others to do so as well. Yet over and over, we have realized that human beings remain as willful and self-centered as ever, even during a pandemic. Differing voices representing medicine, politics, and the media, rather than working together with shared wisdom and insight, have fought against and disputed with one another.

And yet, Paul’s voice calls out to us across two millennia encouraging us to be wise in our lifestyles, making the most of our time “because the days are evil.” Paul reminds us to continue with care and wisdom to make the most of our days and our time.

Today’s words from Proverbs, “*Lay aside immaturity, and live, and walk in the way of insight,*” also remind us that life is about becoming mature in our thoughts, our habits, and our gifts. Proverbs calls this “*walking in the way of insight.*” Who would not want to have clear insight into themselves, into others and into the world? With the help of scientific instruments like modern telescopes and microscopes, we can look deeply into the far reaches of the cosmos and into the depth of cells, atoms and particles. And yet as human beings, we are profoundly resistant in our willingness to look into ourselves so that we might gain insight into our hearts, our minds, and our actions.

Psalm 34 today also invites us to “*depart from evil, and do good,*” and to “*seek peace, and pursue it.*” Today’s readings all sound surprisingly current and meaningful.

When preparing for sermons I enjoy looking at the Greek text, because it is like “looking under the hood” of the New Testament, so to speak, at the engine that drives all theology and translations of the Bible. Paul exhorts the Ephesians today to “*giving thanks at all times for all things.*” Yet who hasn’t met someone, who though they have much to give thanks for, instead spends their days and

even lifetimes grumbling and arguing about nearly everything? We all have done it. The words “give thanks,” in Greek, come from the word “*eucharisto*,” which is, of course, the source of the word “Eucharist.” Eucharist means, “to give thanks,” and in a few minutes as we celebrate the Eucharist, we will hear the words, “Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.” With open and thankful hearts we receive Jesus in his holy supper; we give thanks knowing Jesus abides in us. We give thanks for what the Lord has done for us and how the Lord abides with us amidst the evil of the world, encouraging us to do good and pursue peace.

Like the Jewish leaders in today’s gospel, we too, have Jesus present and living among us in the Eucharist, and yet we dispute among ourselves, “*How can this man give us his flesh to eat? - How can Jesus possibly help us?*” Churches continue argue theologically with one another; Christians argue politically with one another; and human beings continue to argue about the causes of the evils of poverty, injustice and discrimination of every kind - all while Jesus stands in our very midst offering us the bread of life so that we might become his body in the world.

And yet, at times, how many of us have asked, “How can my life possibly make a difference in this world?” “How can Jesus make a difference in my life?” “How can the bread of life, Jesus, make a difference amidst all of the evil of these days - days of pandemic, days of strife and discord, days of grief and mourning?” “*How can this man give us his flesh to eat?*” If Jesus was standing before you what would you do? Would you argue with him, or would you ask him to help you?

Many of you know that I taught Church History in a college and a seminary in Tokyo. One of the courses I taught in Japanese was titled “Readings about Life and Love.” It was a course that began with by examining what the Bible teaches about God’s gracious gift of life and love. Each week we read from a different theologian, from ancient and from medieval history, and when we got to the modern period we read from among others, Albert Schweitzer.

Dr. Albert Schweitzer may not be a name that is familiar to many young people today, but Schweitzer was a Lutheran French-German theologian, organist, philosopher and physician who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1952 for his theology of “Reverence for life” (in German, *Ehrfurcht vor dem Leben*). Yet Schweitzer also lived in a time of tumult. He lived through two World Wars and the waning days of colonialism in Africa and Asia. After being awarded a Ph.D. in Theology in 1899, Schweitzer was ordained as a curate in 1900. In 1905, with Charles-Marie Widor, he founded the Paris Bach Society, and published works about J.S. Bach. In 1905, at the age of 30, he began medical studies and became a physician at age 37 in 1912. For much of the remainder of

his life, Schweitzer was a medical doctor in Lambarené in French colonial Gabon working among the sick and the poor. He funded his work by returning to Europe to give organ recitals, and he also continued to write.

In 1923, he published a work titled, *Civilization and Ethics* where he argued, contrary to René Descartes' idea, "I think, therefore I am" (*cogito, ergo sum*); writing, "The most immediate fact of humanity's consciousness is the idea 'I am life which wills to live, in the midst of life which wills to live.'" In other words, to be alive and to be human is to be conscious of being alive and conscious of one's own will to live. Schweitzer argued that having reverence for one's own life should lead one to the same reverence for the life of one's neighbor.

In 1930 responding to a letter, Albert Schweitzer wrote, "Reverence for life is Christian love...that deals with reality" (*Collected Letters*). And so we return to day's readings. For Schweitzer to be a modern Christian meant regarding the life of one's neighbor as just as sacred as one's own life. In other words, when Jesus promises to give us life, Jesus gives us his own life with a purpose: that we might seek to protect and lift up the life of our neighbor in the reality of the evil and brokenness of this world.

In other words, in the Eucharist, Jesus abides in us with an ethical imperative: that we might overcome the reality of sin and evil in this world. This means Christian love is never abstract or naïve; rather, it is always about seeking to help, protect, and lift up the life of one's neighbor.

In 1961, Schweitzer wrote of the trap of our modernity,

People today live in an atmosphere of inhumanity. They are trapped in it! ...People take for granted the possibility of war with horrible nuclear arms. We now have to raise our voices for humanity so that we may become humane humans. The first utterances that Jesus, made in Galilee, included the Beatitudes concerning the merciful and the peacemakers, in which [Jesus] proclaims humanity! (*Collected Letters*).

Jesus came to complete our humanity, to restore the divine image of God to our humanity. Albert Schweitzer is remembered because Jesus abided in him, and he in Jesus, so that he could abide in and live for others. Schweitzer, like Christ Jesus, though he was rich in talents and gifts, became poor like Christ to serve and uphold the lives of others. We need models like this of Christian service in today's world.

Shortly before his death, Schweitzer wrote in 1964, "Jesus is our guide. God sent him to us" (*Collected Letters*). What would you do if Jesus stood before you and said, "*I am the living bread*"

*that came down from heaven...the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.*” What would you do? Would you argue and dispute with him, or would you ask Jesus for this bread?

We are all familiar with the well-known phrase “You are what you eat.” It, of course, means that what we put into our bodies has a direct impact upon our health, our energy, and how well we are able to live and function. What we choose to eat even has an ethical dimension of whether our choices sustain the environment and the lives and livelihood of others. What we eat speaks to our insight into ourselves, others, and human community.

Jesus gives himself as bread for the life of the world. With outstretched hands, do we receive the bread and the wine knowing that Jesus abides in us, recreating us into his body in the world? Albert Schweitzer understood the ethical imperative of abiding in Jesus and Jesus in him, because it means we are freed to live for others with “reverence” for their lives.

You are what you eat. In the Eucharist, we receive the living bread of heaven. In the bread and the wine Jesus abides in us so that we can abide in him for the world. Someone like Schweitzer did good, sought peace, and pursued it because he knew Jesus. You are what you eat.

As we continue in our own age with its evils, self-centered human debates and disputes, may we receive Jesus as the living bread from heaven, so that abiding in us, Jesus might become our guide throughout our lifetimes. Our times are no less filled with difficulty and evil than the writer of Proverbs, the Psalms, Paul or even Albert Schweitzer. We, too, live in a world of ongoing wars, human greed and conflict, a world of illness and death that needs people who follow Jesus as their guide, and receive him as the bread of life.

Schweitzer’s great insight is that my neighbor’s life also needs my care because Jesus also abides in my neighbor. Jesus the bread of life abides in us so that we might have insight into life – that all life is sacred. So in today’s context of a global pandemic, for example, I do not simply wear a mask or get vaccinated to protect only myself, I wear a mask and I get vaccinated because my neighbor’s life is also valuable. We may not all be able to become physicians like Schweitzer, but we can abide in the same Jesus who calls us to care for our neighbor as much as ourselves.

Abide in Jesus. With outstretched hands, give thanks that he abides in you. Let Jesus, and him alone, be your guide. Abide in Jesus and live. Amen.