

Sermon
Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Sunday, August 25th, 2024
Church of the Ascension, Ottawa
The Reverend Victoria Scott

Readings: [1 KINGS 8:\(1, 6, 10-11\) 22-30, 41-43; PSALM 84; EPHESIANS 6:10-20; JOHN 6:56-69](#)

If you've been listening to me these last two years – today is the second anniversary of my coming to be with you here at Ascension ☺ – you will have heard me talk about the word “and”. “And” is at the heart of our faith as followers of Jesus.

Religion has in the past, and often continues, to follow a pattern of taking sides. Faith and belief have been expressed in a dialogue of arguing one position against another. This encourages us, as individuals, to “take a stance”: to declare our position, firmly, with no room for questioning. The truth is though, that we're walking a fine line. It's never one or the other in a solid, permanent way. We are always, in our humanity, walking a line between faithful and fickle. Between confidence and questioning. Between affirmation and resistance. Between belief and betrayal. “And”. We are always in a place of “and”, a place – a space – between.

This year, our lectionary has us spend five weeks making our way through the sixth chapter of John's Gospel. In this chapter, Jesus miraculously feeds a crowd of more than five thousand people; he challenges them to move beyond needing “signs and wonders”, declaring “I am the bread of life”, and he points toward the Eucharist as a meal of intimate communion with God. In this week's passage Jesus underlines the point of all this: to lead us toward eternal life – genuine, true, real life.

John's Gospel has much to offer us. It is very different from Matthew, Mark, and Luke, and we need to remember to encounter it in a different way. It is full of deeply poetic language and imagery. It invites us, again and again, to see and hear and feel more than what is immediately before us in earthly, tangible terms.

Our Gospel passage ended with these verses:

“Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.”

This is certainly a high note, isn't it? It seems neat and tidy, finished: there is nowhere else to go. That's not where this chapter ends, though. The very next verses are this:

“Jesus answered them, “Did I not choose you, the twelve? Yet one of you is a devil. He was speaking of Judas son of Simon Iscariot, for he, though one of the twelve, was going to betray him.”

Much as we might want to end on a high note, with the solid statement “We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God”, we can’t. That’s not where it ends. That’s never where it ends. There is always the possibility of what the verse about Judas predicts: there is always the potential, in our humanity, in our world, for betrayal. Notice who says these words “We have come to believe and know...”. It is Peter. He says this now, but he will, as we well know, deny Jesus. And not once, but three times.

John’s Gospel offers us a corrective against viewing a relationship with God as solidified statements. It invites us away from viewing Christianity as set in stone. By taking us to a place between belief and betrayal we are invited to a space between, and in this space we find what Jesus has been talking about in this teaching on the bread of life. There is discomfort in today’s Gospel passage. We hear that many took offence and left. That space between – a space that acknowledges all the “ands” of our life and world – can be uncomfortable, unpredictable, indeterminable, but along with that discomfort and unpredictability there is an embracing of who and how and what we are in our humanity which opens us to potential and possibility. That potential and possibility is realized not in winning arguments about faith. It is found in companionship and conversation. It is found in dialogue that is both speaking and listening. It is found in relationship.

The word “abide” appears over and over in John’s Gospel. Part of abiding with Jesus is opening ourselves to the intangible along with the tangible in this earthly realm, knowing that he is with us in all of it. Part of abiding with Jesus is pausing in the “ands” of this life. Author John Phillip Newell reminds us to “listen for the heartbeat” of God – this is abiding. It’s pausing to listen even though the din of the ways of our world can be deafening. It’s pausing to question, to be willing to shift our certainties and have our perspectives expand and change.

The Gospel of John requires us not to be caught in the literal, and so too does our reading from Ephesians. For many of us, this militaristic imagery is deeply uncomfortable. If we are willing to move in the metaphor, the image of the armour of God can function in a helpful way. If we can hold lightly the image of armour – of breastplate, shield and sword – we might see the armour of God as a recognition that God is with us. That armour is strength that we draw on knowing that God is with us, loving us, and wanting the best for us and for our world. That armour is relationship and connection.

What if being a soldier of the cross has not to do with conversion, but rather with solidarity? What if it has to do with standing firm, in non-violent resistance to forces that divide and destroy our humanity, and our world? What if it is recognizing and naming evil forces, and denouncing violence while honouring relationship and connection? While I recognize that this is not the traditional or the historical definition of “soldier of the cross”, I invite you to think about how we might reimagine and reclaim this imagery.

Wearing the armour of God and proclaiming the Gospel of peace is about making visible the love of God. It is about shining a light into the darkness of our world. It's about choosing love – choosing loving relationship with God, with each other and with our world.

I'll be walking with a group of queer Anglicans and allies in this afternoon's PRIDE parade. I will be wearing the armour of God's strong love, and I'll be choosing solidarity and loving relationship with members of the LGBTQIA+ community. I'll be celebrating love and connection and inclusivity.

At a clergy day in the spring, Bishop Shane reminded us that “tomorrow has not yet been created”. We are unfinished the world is unfinished. Tomorrow is an “and” - it has not yet been created, and we are invited to partner with God in creating our tomorrows. We are part of tomorrow – not changing it but creating it. Jesus is our invitation to do that knowing that we are loved by God. We are invited to create our tomorrows abiding with, in relationship with Jesus and in loving companionship with others and with our world.

I pray that this time here together this morning will help us to rest and abide in that place of “and”, where rigidity gives way to a commitment to move with the Spirit. May we feel love and connection in our song and prayers, and may we taste it in bread and wine. May we leave here feeling the strong love of God with us and may that enable us to walk – and talk – with each other, today, and every day. In Jesus name. Amen.