

The Rev. Dr. Hilary B. Smith

Holy Comforter

Richmond, VA

August 2, 2015; the 10th Sunday after Pentecost

Readings: 2 Samuel 11:26-12:13a; Psalm 51:1-13; Ephesians 4:1-16; John:6:24-35.

Experiencing the Food that Endures

Much of life does not endure, but perishes---we do not need to be told this, we see all the time and all around.

What blooms today is gone tomorrow.

Even when something seems to be here year after year, usually there is a change associated with it, and change is never easy, even when we think that we are prepared for it or looking forward to it.

When we feel that we are standing on shifting ground, where do we find our center?

We may know that we need to be more centered or we might be like King David when confronted by the prophet Nathan: "You are the man!"

What a great scene!

David is so lost and clueless about what he has done from God's perspective...David needs to find his center, his grounding.

How do we become or remain grounded?

And all of this is to ask, how can we know the God of our salvation?

How and where do we find "the food that endures for eternal life," of which Jesus speaks in response to the people who search for him, as recorded in John's Gospel.

John's Gospel gives us the gift of seeing Jesus and seeing our faith the way the first mystics saw Jesus... and the faith that was growing up, through the on-going experience of the Risen Christ.

Marcus Borg, one of the Jesus' scholars of our time, speaks of his shock

with as a young college student, he learned that John's Gospel is more faith than fact...it was later that Borg realized that John's Gospel speaks truth across the centuries even if Jesus himself did not say words.

What? Jesus didn't say all that, word for word?

Shocking to some, but for others, most of us, it opens a way to hear these words and know of their truth as conveyed to us by the Jesus Movement of long ago, those seeking share what they were experiencing...knowing something of the food that does not perish, the bread that gives life to the world.

In his book, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, Borg describes his journey as one that moved beyond belief to relationship, as one who came to understand the Christian life as being about, "entering into a relationship with that to which the Christian tradition points, which may be spoken of as God, the risen living Christ, or the Spirit."¹

I can agree with Borg absolutely and also say that I believe in God the Holy Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; God the Holy Trinity: Creator, Christ and Holy Comforter.

But all my belief means little if it does not make a difference in my life and then, by extension...in the lives I touch, in the caring for others and seeking justice...caring for creation...God calls us to do all these things and God gives us what we need to do them, God gives God's Self...the bread of life, the food that endures for ever. The food that we need for the journey.

And I would say that being beyond belief does not mean we have given up

¹ Borg, Marcus J. *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time: The Historical Jesus & The Heart of Contemporary Faith*. HarperCollins Epub, 2009, original publication date, 1994, HarperCollins, Loc. 632 of 3345.

belief but that we have moved to a deeper place...that it is not just about what is in our head but also in heart, a place of relationship, a relationship that is the solid ground when life is shifting, changing.

“Jesus said to them, ‘I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.’” In this sentence, we hear about both relationship and belief, ‘whoever comes to me,’ and then belief.

Often that is how it happens, relationship first often with other Christians, with a church, with a fellowship of people, and then belief.

But how ever it happens for a person, relationship and belief go together---relationship with each other---relationship with God---for a relationship to work, there needs to be communication---and it is said that God’s language is silence.

Today after this service and our Birthday celebration for all August birthdays, two trained spiritual directors will be leading a forum on ways of being in relationship with God through various prayer practices...one of the directors is me, and then other is Joella Rhoades...

Joella is also offering group spiritual direction here at HoCo for those who feel called to that relational way of growing in our knowledge and love of God...if interested in that, please speak with Joella.²

In my spiritual journey, as I was first growing as a Christian, the church helped me...so much...and as I grew in faith, in my relationship with God...the church continued to help me, and still does...so much.

I want everyone to know the sort of grace, the power of God’s love, that I have known through the church...in different ways, throughout my

² Group spiritual direction is way to reflect upon one’s life and relationship with God in a supportive group with a trained spiritual director who facilitates the group. I’m delighted that this is being offered by Joella Rhoades; she is one of the faculty for the School of Spiritual Direction at Richmond Hill. There is no cost to participate in group spiritual direction at Holy Comforter. Joella’s contact info is in our parish directory.

journey.

This is why the Church exists, why this church Holy Comforter is here at the corner of Monument and Staples Mill, to be here for people, to help people experience the bread of life...the food that does not perish...

to help people deepen and grow in relationship with God, find that grounding, find their center.

And when they come here, we find our experience of God's incarnation expanded...we help each other by being here...so it is selfish on my part...I want everyone here to help me know God through them.

But as we have been discussing---in our time---Christianity is not about waiting for people to come here---we must engage people where they live...where their lives happen...both in actual locations, and in the sense of knowing their lives and seeking to be a church for them.

True, we will never be all things for all people...but I've been discerning, praying, and talk with people for two years about this matter of engaging people where they live...and I'm feeling the movement of the Spirit, the nudging of Spirit to try something new, and see, just see if it will work.

Sometimes people ask me what my vision is for this church...it has to do with engaging people where they are...and how we might do it now. I'm feeling inspired and excited to reach out to families with young children...families with all ages of children, but particularly young children...because I know something of their desire to be in a church community and challenges that they face in getting here.

I've really been feeling the Spirit around a couple of things we are going to try...and I'm pretty sure it is God calling me to lead us in trying this because as much as I love kids, this is not my strongest area of ministry...so I'm going to need your help.

The first thing, is more in my area because it is more for the parents. Through the *ChurchNext* program, we have the ability to offer an on-line class in parenting from the Episcopal Church perspective. This class is not very time demanding, but it does give a lot of pointers and ways of thinking about what parents are already doing from the God perspective...and it is aimed at providing grounding for parents in the wonderful, but demanding, ministry of raising children.

In the next week, I will be contacting parents about this class, a class that they can do from home on their own schedule, while interacting with other parents from HoCo on-line, and, at the end of the class, there will be chance to come together, in person, to discuss the class and get to know each other better.

The second thing we are going to offer as a church, I will need more help with...we are going to offer a new service on Sundays starting in October, and the name for this and description came to me practically in a vision, a time of prayerful reflection for sure, the service will be called:

Story Time--a service for children, their families, and friends of all ages.

This is going to be a super casual, come as you are service, during which I and others, are going to tell the stories of our faith in words that children and others can understand, with liturgy that allows for a lot of creativity.

The new service will be at 4pm or 4:30pm, leaning more to 4:30pm right now and will decide this in the next couple of weeks---thinking we will offer dinner after for these families.

Let me know, those of you with kids, if 4pm or 4:30pm would be better...the service will be between 30 and 45 minutes.

Engaging families with young children in ways that work for them is just one example of how our church can go to where people live, showing them that we get it; we care; we want them to know the love of God that we have known.

We want them to have the support and grounding in that which does not perish...because we all need this ground.

It makes such a difference to experience the bread from heaven that gives life to the world.

Let us pray:

*Creator of unity,
Body of peace,
Spirit of community,
bind us together around your Word
and send us out to do your justice,
show your mercy,
and embody your redeeming love,
glorifying you,
Holy Trinity. Amen.*

The concluding prayer is taken from Kimberly Bracken Long, Editor. *Feasting On The Word Worship Companion: Liturgies For Year B, Volume 2, Trinity Sunday Through Reign of Christ*. Westminster John Knox Press, 2015, Epub, Loc 2300-2309 of 5880.