

**AUGUST 12, 2018**  
**PROPER 14, 12 AFTER PENTECOST, YEAR B**  
**HOLY COMFORTER EPISCOPAL CHURCH**  
**RICHMOND VIRGINIA.**

**John 6:35, 41-51**

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. Then the Jews began to complain about him because he said, "I am the bread that came down from heaven." They were saying, "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, 'I have come down from heaven'?" Jesus answered them, "Do not complain among yourselves. No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me; and I will raise that person up on the last day. It is written in the prophets, 'And they shall all be taught by God.' Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me. Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father. Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."

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It was not what any of us expected.

My colleague, Professor Ed Felton, and I were surprised to learn that most of the 24 students in our MBA class at William and Mary had never been to an art gallery, simply had never learned how to look at pictures in an exhibition. In our "Business and the Arts" programme, we had wanted to broaden their education, inviting them to my home once a month for wine, cheese and a talk by a painter or sculptor, a

playwright, poet, or novelist, a choreographer or stage set designer. A very popular gathering; lots of intelligent questions.

But never even *been* to an art gallery? So we organized an evening in the College's wonderful Muscarelle Art Gallery with expert guides as instructors - art historians, to teach us about what was on display.

It was not what we expected.

Oh, the ground floor gallery had original drawings by Leonardo da Vinci. The students were amazed to be able to stand right in front of masterpieces from one of the world's greatest artists. We heard "WOW!!" a lot: we expected that!

Then we went upstairs to a smaller gallery to a totally unexpected exhibit.

Of picture frames.

Just empty picture frames surrounding space on the walls. There were ornate, intricately-carved and gilded frames from the sixteenth century and modern frames of aluminium and steel from very much the present day. But no paintings were displayed in them, just the empty frames defining space on the walls. We had not expected this. Nor had we expected the students' positive reaction: total silence and concentration.

Who looks, really looks, focusing attention on the frame around a painting? And yet each frame had been chosen to enhance the painting or drawing of that period. The students looked and thought about the different character of the space each frame surrounded and defined.

Sir Peter Brook, the most brilliant producer and director of plays for the Royal Shakespeare Company, wrote a book about theatre, "The Empty Space."

The book begins:

"I can take any space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged."

The empty space is like one of the picture frames in the Muscarelle gallery exhibition. The bare stage is like a window frame to look through, not look at.

A woman walks across the bare stage, stops walking, and turns toward us.

Look at her lovely costume! She is a beautiful PRINCESS!! She really is!! And, she is taking to her Daddy, the King! We sit forward, listening, as she speaks. We know what to expect: we have seen Walt Disney princesses! Listen!

"Sir, I love you more than words can wield the matter;  
Dearer than eyesight, space, and liberty;  
Beyond that can be valued, rich or rare;  
No less than life, with grace, health, beauty, honour;  
As much as a child e'er loved, or father found;  
A love that makes breath poor, and speech unable;  
Beyond all manner of so much I love you."

We no longer not see a mere woman in a rich costume, a woman who walked onto a bare stage, an empty space! The space has been filled with our expectations! Awwww.

But the name of the princess is Goneril. She loathes her father the King, King Lear, for Goneril is a hate-filled character in a dark tragedy by William Shakespeare. Our expectations changed, have they? Those honeyed words to which we just listened, do they sound as sweet on our enthralled ears?

What we see. What we hear. What we expect.

Brook tells us about an unexpected experience of theatre he, and oddly my former Headmaster, John Thorn, then sub-lieutenants, Royal Navy, off a destroyer, an experience shared in the bombed-out ruins of Hamburg in the bitterly-cold winter of 1946.

"Walking along the Reeperbahn in Hamburg on an afternoon in 1946, whilst a damp dispiriting grey mist whirled round the desperate mutilated tarts, some on crutches, noses mauve, cheeks hollow, I saw a crowd of children pushing excitedly into a night club door. I followed them. On the stage was a bright blue sky. Two seedy, spangled clowns sat on a painted cloud on their way to visit the Queen of Heaven. 'What shall we ask her for?' said one. 'Dinner,' said the other and the children screamed approval. 'What shall we have for dinner?' 'Schinken, leberwurst ...' the clown began to list all the unobtainable foods and the squeals of excitement were gradually replaced by a hush—a hush that settled into a deep and true theatrical silence. An image was being made real, in answer to the need for something that was not there." Bread was not there in that hungry winter of 1946. "Sir, give us this bread always."

Jesus spoke about the bread of heaven. Our Lord spoke about himself as the bread of life. Of course, we just have the familiar words written in English on a paper page in the Gospel of St John. We don't have our Lord's tone of voice, pitch, pause, rhythm, and gesture. The meaning is our expectations. The misunderstanding among those who first heard Jesus speak is right there before us in St John's script of this scene.

"They were saying, 'Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, 'I have come down from heaven?'"

Our Lord, Jesus Christ, speaks of himself as 'the bread of life.' But this Jesus was Jesus of Nazareth, "the Son of Joseph, whose parents we know." The audience which heard

him then, expected him to speak as Jesus of Nazareth. Modern Biblical literalists expect him to be Jesus of Pepperidge Farm; clean, white, sliced Jesus. They may have forgotten what that famous Christian author, C.S. Lewis wrote: "No one could say he took the Bible literally who knew what 'literal' meant."

What we see. What we hear. They come from what we expect.

Look at Jesus: Jesus is the Christ of God. He is like a picture frame and the space we see held by him in the Gospels is where we see that God is Christ-like and in God is no un-Christ-likeness at all."

Do we expect to look at Jesus, or see 'through' Jesus to God?

The space between notes makes music possible. Without that space framing notes we have inchoate noise. The space between words makes speech comprehensible, and prayer, otherwise, instead of "Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name" we would have mere noise.

And it's the same with the cross. In museums all over Europe there are elaborate gold, be-jewelled crosses, major works of art. Museum visitors wonder at the beauty and craftsmanship: that's what they went to see. Visitors say, "WOW! Pure gold! Real emeralds and rubies! I wonder what that's worth? What do you think it would cost to insure?" And then they move on to the next marvel in the next display case.

By now you can see by how much that cross as a work of art, fails. It fails in its purpose to be a cross-shaped, empty space, a bare stage for the drama of our redemption.

It stops the eye of mere connoisseurs. Two bare sticks tied together in a cross would serve the purpose better. You

wouldn't be tempted to look at such a crude cross; nothing to admire here, move on. Unless your expectations are different. Then, you'd go deeper, look through the cross as if it were a picture frame, a window frame, an empty space, a stage for the drama of our redemption. You would look past the little solid gold figure hanging in glittering agony to the real Christ beyond, the Christ who died, and rose, and ascended, leaving the mystery of an empty cross and the empty tomb, an empty space.

Put all easy expectations aside. In a moment, soon, we will rise from our seats and, like the hungry children in a cold hungry winter long ago, we shall flock (in an orderly Episcopalian fashion) to the altar step with empty, empty hands, and hearts empty of what we need. Empty, yes, but ready to receive the love of Christ himself, given for us, in our hands, on our lips. We expect, as it were, to look 'through' or 'past' the bread, and the wine, past Jesus of Nazareth, to the Christ of God, beyond our expectations or imaginings. Look beyond bread and wine to the Body of Christ, given for us, and the Blood of Christ, poured out for us. The bread and the wine are a frame, a metaphor, surrounding a holy, empty, sacred space into which Christ invites us beyond all expectations, beyond all imaginings..