

Proper 15B. August 16, 2015. St. Christopher's. John 6:51-58.

This past weekend, one St. Christopher's parishioner began her Saturday by volunteering with the St. C's Service Corps at the Oak Park Food Pantry, before quickly changing clothes and rushing over to the church to assist with Bishop Onell Soto's funeral. After this, she stopped by her home for a few hours before coming back on Sunday morning to attend Paris's last Sunday Eucharist. I admit that I don't know whether she continued on to the stewardship fellowship event at Scoville Park Sunday night.

This remarkable weekend encapsulates, for me, the place where our church is right now. Paris has begun the sabbatical that will take her into retirement after almost twenty years of faithful, compassionate, and imaginative leadership in this community. We all are grateful and will miss her greatly. It was good to share that last worship service together, and we'll get to say goodbye again once Paris is healed enough to attend.

But while we have just rightly paused to mark a momentous transition, the work of the church goes on. As our exemplary parishioner's weekend shows, people are still in need of food, accompaniment in grief, the proclamation of the life-giving gospel, and Christian fellowship. In the next few months, we will be called both to pause to discern certain major questions regarding our future, and to continue serving and praying and loving with full vigor. We are in between rectors, but the church has always been "in between," at least in between Christ's Incarnation and Second Coming. As uncomfortable as it is, it is also our natural state. And if the deliberation of the transition process may sometimes bewilder us, part of the purpose behind that is to call the congregation into more and more assurance of its identity and leadership in its own life. If we do this right, the in between is an opportunity to claim and live our identity in an even more profound way.

And so this morning our task is to consider what it looks like for us to be the church "in between." And specifically, what can the sixth chapter of John tell us about who we are, as a church in between, right now. We've been reading this chapter of John for all of the dog days of summer—it's one long discourse about Jesus and bread. And now that we're getting to verses 51-58, it's easy to forget that this whole chapter started with Jesus miraculously feeding thousands of people with a little bread and fish. Fifty verses ago, Jesus had been teaching all day, way out in the middle of nowhere, and he had a huge crowd gathered around that was very hungry. Somehow all they had was a little bread and a little fish, with no means to get more food. People are hungry; they need to eat; but the circumstances are not ideal for a mass picnic.

Jesus feeds them anyway. This is the first thing John 6 tells us about being the church in between. Our circumstances are not ideal for doing all the projects we'd like to do, or for meeting all the needs we'd like to address in the world. But we're going to do it anyway. I am talking about literally feeding people: the Housing Forward PADS shelter season will begin on September 18; the St. C's Service Corps continues to serve regular shifts at the food pantry; we will again be participating in the St. Cyprian's Thanksgiving Basket program; I think we're going to observe Bread for the World Sunday in mid-October; and there are still opportunities for any interested folks to cook for the last two Housing Forward summer shelter sites.

But I also mean all of the ways that we are called to love and serve the world that God created and in which Christ lived. A world that is crying out for the love of God, expressed imperfectly through our hands, feet, and voices. We are right now looking for

new ways to live into our partnership with St. Luke's, our companion parish in Renk; Deacon Sue is exploring ways for us to partner with churches two miles East of us, in Chicago's Austin neighborhood; and the Service Corps is seeking new ways—and new volunteers—to continue to translate the love of God into hands-on interactions with our larger community. Yes, this is a time of transition—but it is also an excellent time to get involved.

All of this is part of being the church in between, part of being the church that is always in between, always a little bit inadequate to our goals, but moving ever-deeper into the promises of God. But John 6 kind of tells us something else about who we are right now, if you'll bear with me for a moment. Throughout chapter six, while he has been talking about eating his flesh and drinking his blood, Jesus has been using a very polite word for “eat.” The Greek word is “esthio,” and it's not unlike saying “I am the living bread that comes down from heaven. Whoever dines on this bread will live forever.” It might be the kind of dinner we have to dress for.

But in today's passage, Jesus suddenly changes the word he uses for “eat.” It doesn't show up in the translation, I guess because it's gross. But suddenly he starts using the word “trogo,” which is more like “to chew, to gnaw, to masticate.” So, “Those who chew, who gnaw on, who masticate my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life.” Jesus shifts from the abstract idea of eating to the actual bodily mechanics of eating—the physical process of eating. Eating isn't very beautiful when it's broken down this way, the movements of jaw, tongue, lips, and throat. It's a process that we need to go through, but when described this way doesn't call up much excitement.

Ah, can you see where I'm going here? Wonderful results, like the health and delicious taste that come from eating, sometimes come from a mechanical process that doesn't look like it can be connected to the wonderful results. And we are in a process. Hopefully you received the most recent update from the search committee in this past week's church email. We have a number of steps that we (well, really you) are going to go through to call a new rector. And at times some of these steps will feel distant from the reason we all come to church. But if we (really, you) embrace this time as an opportunity to articulate and claim who you are as a part of the body of Christ, then it can reap long-lasting rewards. Now, during these slightly mechanical steps of transition, is the time to speak truth, to dream big, to tell the rest of the community about your dreams for what you together can be.

And finally, any Anglican would have a hard time reading this passage without thinking of the Eucharist. This meal that we eat together at God's table is the center of our common life and our principal act of worship each week. Whatever the staffing circumstances at St. Christopher's, we are a worshipping community. Yes, we're in transition and going through a process. But who we are in between doesn't change that much. The words we'll pray in a few minutes, at the post-communion prayer, sum it up nicely. As we discern and search and grieve Paris leaving, here is what we are to do and be:

God of abundance, you have fed us with the bread of life and cup of salvation; you have united us with Christ and one another; and you have made us one with all your people in heaven and on earth. Now send us forth in the power of your Spirit, that we may proclaim your redeeming love to the world and continue forever in the risen life of Christ our Savior. Amen.