

“Bon Appétit!”
A Sermon preached by the Rev. Scott Herr
First Presbyterian, New Canaan – August 1, 2021

Please read:
Ephesians 4:1-16
John 6:24-35

In his day, theologian Karl Barth said people come to church asking, “Is it true?” Now with the threat of the Delta variant, opioid crisis, social¹ and political polarity, climate chaos, forest fires and flooding on the rise, people are hungering for something that works, an *experience* that meets our deeper spiritual needs.

It was wonderful to have my parents, brother and nephew visit with us the past week or so. We enjoyed a number of really good meals together. One night Matthew, our son, took the chef hat and the other men as his sous-chefs to help prepare a dinner. Ever since Kim watched Julia Child’s and cooked her food, at each of our family meals, she says “Bon Appetit!” and that’s time to dig in!

And so, we enjoyed some good food, good wine, and conversation. At one point my brother, who I haven’t seen in years, talked about our different faith journeys. He came to church two Sundays ago, he said, to experience our community (which my family all enjoyed meeting you). Something happened during the prayers that he hadn’t experienced in a very long time. He was able to experience transcendence, to touch something outside of himself. It was hard for him to describe, but it was, to make a long story short, good to be reminded that there is something to community, the embodiment of a love that will not let us go ...

And it got me to thinking. We have let too many things go, especially in the past 18 months of the pandemic. We have substituted virtual Zooms for live meetings, isolation for community, texts for conversation. Many people are wondering if going to church is worth it. I can’t answer that, but I know that it is *qualitatively different* to show up in this space than to watch what’s happening on a screen. The sound of that organ which Jan is playing so beautifully, literally changes the molecules in the room. Physical space is transformed by our presence together and scientists tell us that our joy is significantly more intense when it is experienced in community versus when we are alone.² Will we throw that away?

It’s possible, I suppose, for in many ways, we are a disposable society, with disposable diapers, disposable relationships, disposable careers, disposable homes, lifestyles, leadership, you name it ... In his book, *What are people for?* American poet and author Wendell Berry writes, “Close inspection of our countryside would reveal, strewn over it from one end to the other, thousands of derelict and worthless automobiles, house trailers, refrigerators, stoves, freezers, washing machines, etc., ... Much of our waste problem is to be accounted for by the intentional flimsiness and unreparability of the labor-savers and gadgets that we have become addicted to.” But “the truth is that we Americans, all of us, have become a kind of human trash, living our lives in the midst of a ubiquitous ... mess of which *we are at once the victims and the perpetrators.*” So wrote Berry ...

¹ See David Brooks’ article in the NY Times, “What’s Ripping American Families Apart?” (NYT, July 29, 2021), A22.

² Adam Grant, ““There’s a Specific Kind of Joy We’ve Been Missing” (*The New York Times*, July 10, 2021), referenced online Monday, July 12, 2021:
<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/10/opinion/sunday/covid-group-emotions-happiness.html>

Are we a people becoming a kind of *human trash*, a disposable society? The comments around Simone Biles' withdrawal from competition in Tokyo is revealing ... I don't know if Olympic gymnast Simone Biles is a hero, but maybe that's the wrong question. She is a proven champion, but a *human* champion and I think worthy of our compassion when she admits her brokenness and need to step down for health reasons. I suspect that there are quite a few lives that she's probably saved by her example. There are so many people who hunger, who have a deep longing for that which has a more lasting quality, for that which rings true, that doesn't have this temporary disposable feel to it. The real deal ...

In our Gospel lesson, Jesus was dealing with a crowd hungry for something more, just confused about what it really was and how they were going to get it. Notice the crowd pursued Jesus from the loaves and fishes feast on the mountainside all the way across the Sea of Tiberius to Capernaum.

At first, we are impressed. They want to be near Jesus. They want to hear more teaching; they long to deepen their encounter with God. In short, the crowd seems hungry for deeper things, for that which will satisfy their spiritual hunger.

But though they "found" Jesus, they didn't understand what he really offers. There's a confusing exchange of questions and answers where Jesus discerns what the crowd is really looking for. "You are not looking for me because of the signs of God's presence. You're looking for me because you got well fed on the mountain."

It's a complex story and we should be careful ... These people are not simply looking for another free lunch, coming to church for the Deacon pastries and not the worship, who show up in the sanctuary only to make good business connections. That's not the case at all. When they had been fed on the mountain, they confessed, "This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world."

So why does Jesus challenge their motives? Perhaps it's because Jesus perceives they are following him simply because he can make their lives *better*, but on their terms and in their categories. You see, Jesus wants to give them *life*; they want an *improved lifestyle*. Jesus wants to give them bread that feeds the soul; they want bread that feeds the belly. Both are necessary, but one is a strictly a temporary fix, the other, healing for an eternity.

Like the people of Israel who in the wilderness cursed God, saying they'd rather go back to Egypt, too often we humans crave and settle for security, bread on the table, even when we know life must be more than that. As the Roman Juvenas once said, "Give them bread and circuses and they will never revolt." Given the choice of bread for the stomach or bread for the soul, I think we all know what we'd opt for, even if it meant putting Jesus back on the cross ...

But our risen Lord lovingly comes back to us, offering us food that endures, that holds fast when the bottom comes out of your life, when you've made a mistake and need forgiveness; when you've been given the cancer diagnosis and need hope; when you've been told that you are no longer needed and need to know that you are loved and valued. Jesus feeds the deep hunger of the soul. He offers not the food that perishes, but the food that endures for eternal life.

The “food that endures for eternal life,” is of course, Jesus himself. “I am the bread of life,” he tells the crowd. This is not perishable bread that feeds a passing whim, but the nourishment of God that feeds our souls. This is not bread that we are supposed to knead and bake, as if we could. This is bread that God gives us as a sheer gift, the invitation to enter into loving relationship that we might know - no matter what - that God loves us and will always be there for us.

When the crowd, continuing to be confused, asked Jesus, “What must we do to perform the works of God?” Jesus said in effect, “You cannot perform the work of God. *God alone redeems*. All you can do is believe it, receive it, and live it.”

It’s interesting to me that John never uses the *noun* for faith (*pistis*) but always its *verbal form*, *pisteuein* (“to believe,” “to have faith,” “to come to faith,” or “to put faith in”). John’s use of “to believe” is not about giving consent to a set of ideas, but *an active commitment to a person, Jesus...*³

You can read about a good meal, or even watch a movie about it, or read recipe books and look at scrumptious pictures, but it’s quite another thing to actually sit down and experience, to enjoy a freshly and lovingly prepared meal. It’s one thing to talk about God, but quite another to trust God, to give your life to God. That’s why in membership classes we ask two questions. The first is, “Who is your Lord and Savior?” with the expected response being Jesus Christ is my Lord and Savior. That’s the “right” answer. The *orthodoxy*. But then comes the second questions, “Do you trust in him?” That’s the *orthopraxy*!

Tom Long writes about a rabbi who died in England. His obituary told of his life, how when he was a young boy, he and his family were prisoners in a Nazi death camp. In the camp, the prisoners were given just barely enough food to survive ... some grain, a bit of stale bread, and a few grams of lard each week. Despite their harsh environment, this boy’s family continued to observe the Sabbath. Somehow managing to scrounge up a piece of candle and a little food each week, they said the Sabbath prayers and pronounced the Sabbath blessings.

One week, however, there was no candle. So, when the evening came and the Sabbath was at hand, the boy’s father took some of the precious lard and molded it around a bit of string. Lighting this makeshift candle, he began to lead his family in the prayers and blessings.

His son was enraged. When the prayers were done, he confronted his father. “How could you do that? How could you waste what little lard we have to make a candle? It’s the only food we have.”

His father answered, “Son, without food we can live for several days. Without hope, we cannot live at all.”

Friends, brothers and sisters, siblings in Christ, as we prepare our hearts to receive from the table today, I invite you to reflect more deeply on the truth that we need to hear as we face the chaos and challenges of our fragile lives and world ... Jesus advises: “Do not work for the food that perishes, (the disposable life), but for the food that endures for eternal life.” Jesus invites you

³ Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John: Introduction, Translation, and Notes in The Anchor Bible* (Garden City: Doubleday & Company Inc., 1966), 512-15.

to believe, but more importantly, to *experience* the healing power of God's love and grace around this table. You are invited to taste and see that the Lord is good, to drink the cup of life and be filled with the bread from heaven. So, *bon appetit!*

In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.