

"As Beloved Children"
A Sermon by the Rev. Scott Herr
First Presbyterian, New Canaan – August 8, 2021

Please Read:
Ephesians 4:35-5:2
John 6: 35, 41-51

I couldn't help myself, and so watched earlier this morning some of the closing ceremony of the Olympics. It's been a strange and surreal summer Olympics, but the Japanese made the best of a difficult situation. There are many memorable moments, from Suni Lee's gold in the overall, to Molly Seidel winning the bronze on her third marathon ever, to the men's 800 when US Isaiah Jewett and Botswana Nigel Amos tripped and fell together, then got up, and walked arm in arm to the finish line.

But the most memorable story for me is still the Simone Biles Olympic saga. Here is one of the most decorated Olympic champions who got the "twisties," the phenomenon gymnastics competitors describe as completely losing a sense of where you are in the middle of your routine, whether a floor, vault, beam, or uneven bars. In fact, it can be quite lethal, and so it made perfect sense for Ms. Biles to take a break. The problem was, it was before an audience of the whole world and after five years of preparation.

What she tweeted recently, though, tells all ... On July 28, she wrote: "The outpouring of love & support I've received has made me realize I'm more than my accomplishments and gymnastics which I never truly believed before." In other words, this terrible and very public twisty worked for good. Simone Biles realized that she is loved, despite her performance. This, in one sense, is nothing less than the gospel itself. It's grace, or "unmerited" favor.

If you were here last week, the last verse of last week begins this week's lectionary gospel text. Jesus says: "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." It's perfect as a communion homily. But, today, I am glad we are not celebrating the Eucharist, because it invites us to contemplate the truth of these words which transcends the physical symbols of bread and the cup.

Jesus' language here must be understood in its larger context. As we learned last week, Jesus is continuing a conversation with some from the crowd of five thousand which he had fed the previous day. Some had wanted to make him a political king by force, but Jesus, knowing that his purpose was not to become a worldly king, withdrew and tried to hide. His disciples, attempting to avoid the crowds, took him across the Sea of Galilee to Capernaum.

The next day others of the loaves and fishes crowd came after Jesus, asking if he would not give them another sign, such as the bread from heaven as Moses gave the people manna in the desert. It's like a Simone Biles moment for Jesus. In a sense, he's saying, I'm more than who you think I am, or what you want me to be. And Jesus points out that it had not been Moses, but God who gave the manna, and that bread from God gives life to the world. And they begged Jesus, "Sir, give us this bread always."

It is at this point in the conversation where Jesus replies with the most astonishing claim, "I am the bread of life." So, we know Jesus is not talking about satisfying physical hunger. Then, what is he talking about?

The hunger of which Jesus speaks I think, is first about a hunger and thirst that comes from an awareness of the futility and hopelessness of life. The hunger to which Jesus alludes is that which comes from longing and waiting for something more. It is a hunger which recognizes and seeks to avoid pain and suffering, and ultimately death. It is a hunger which cries out wildly for life.

Jesus reminds his first hearers of the Exodus story. The Hebrew slaves, after liberation from bondage in Egypt, were led by God into the desert on their way to the promised land. Each day was lived without knowing what was to come ahead. And as they got further and further away from the miraculous liberation God granted them, they began to grumble and complain. They were facing the unknown out in one of the largest deserts in the world. Death was not a theoretical possibility. Some began to question the wisdom of trusting God. Even though this God had freed them miraculously from the shackles of pharaoh, they were hungry, and afraid of facing death in the wilderness.

Jesus' critics also complained about him purporting to be bread sent from heaven. Even though he had performed great miracles, he invited them to a radical new faith, coming away from the power and structures of the religious and political elite. He called them to faith in God to provide for their needs one day at a time. And they feared him. They feared him because they feared death, at least the death of life as they knew it. The old proverb applies, perhaps a known evil is better than an unknown good ...

How different from our ancestors are we? Each one of us faces some kind of hunger for more. Even though we may have experienced the wonders of God, today we grumble and complain; we worry about from where the next loaf of bread is going to come.

Many people are starving spiritually because too many try and feed themselves with whatever is put in front of them. Maybe you can relate with what I am talking about. You struggle with the promises of God. You find it difficult to pray to God, let alone make sense of God's providence in the craziness of this world. You have little or no faith that God will lovingly and graciously provide for you. And because the hunger for meaning, for worth, for security, for a reason to go on living, for tangible hope is valid, we prefer to forage for our own food. Instead of laying our lives before God and trusting God to meet our needs, we try and feed ourselves frantically on a diet of the infinite variety of worldly foodstuffs. We munch onward toward financial success, power, prestige, security, sexual gluttony, and materialistic obesity, to mention only a few. We cram and binge in desperate attempts to find the right food which satisfies the emptiness in our souls, the hunger of our inner spirit for life. And unwittingly we grumble and complain about how God is not providing for our needs ...

Jesus expresses the same frustration that God expressed to the Hebrew slaves. It's not about the bread. It's about belief, the trust in God to provide. It's not about the perfection of religious observance, but about the quality of relationship. Jesus said, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." Rather than part the waters of the sea looming ahead or squash the enemy chasing behind, rather than dazzle us with another miracle of loaves and fishes, Jesus states that he is what we need, and that he is present; he is here for you, if who will come to him with all of your burdens and troubles, with your weariness, anxiety and fear which this world stirs in us.

Which brings us to the Ephesians text. It's the most amazing texts in all of the New Testament, which summarizes both our identity and imperative in one simple sentence. "Be imitators of God, as beloved children ..." Have you ever heard that text before? It blows me away every time I hear it. "Be imitators of God?" What? Speaking of futility? But then there is that little preposition, "as ..." "*as beloved children.*" The two go together. You can't be imitators of God unless you realize your identity as beloved children of God.

And so perhaps this is the most important part of our texts today as we go through the rest of this week. Jesus insisted that the "work" that we need to do is that of belief, in the sense of living by faith. What would it look like if you really believed that you are beloved, that you are a child of God, an heir of the King of the Universe? If it is true, that pretty much takes a lot of my worries and cares away. If it is true that I am a beloved child of the Lord of heaven and earth, whom shall I fear?

I meet with a spiritual director once a month to explore together where God is at work in my life. This week we talked about blessing, and what it would feel like to be truly blessed by God, which is really another way of talking about what it means to rest in our "beloved" status as children of God. She told me the story of a famous pastor whose rebellious son had come to him one day, and said, "Dad, I want your blessing." To which his father replied, "Son, I have always loved you and always want the best for you." But the son said, "No, Dad, I want your blessing right here and now," and he got down on his knees and grabbed his father's hands and put them on his shoulders and again pleaded, "Give me your blessing!"

What do you imagine that Father prayed over his son? I imagine it was one of the most loving and powerful prayers of that preacher's life! I told my spiritual director how thankful I am to have a father and mother who loves and blesses me, and who have given me a blessed life for so many years ... But then my spiritual director asked me, "What kind of blessing do you think God wants to give you now?" It was a powerful moment, realizing that I still live like so many people, even tremendously blessed people, who doubt their own worthiness, worrying that our beloved status is based on our performance, our success, our getting it right ...

So, I invite you to reflect on that for a moment: What kind of blessing do you need? When you are hungry and thirsty for life, where do you turn? It's a question worth asking yourself. Jesus beckons each one of us to stop our private feeding frenzies and come to him and believe that he lived, died and rose again for us. He came that we might know God's gracious forgiveness and love, that our life can have meaning and purpose. I believe that only when we are secure in our identity as *beloved children*, can we live into the imperative to love others as *imitators of God*...

You've heard how C.S. Lewis famously contrasts heaven and hell. Hell, he writes, is a place where there is a magnificent feast set of the finest meats and vegetables, fruits and cheeses, breads and wines, and there is enough for everyone. However, everyone gathered at the table is given a fork just long enough so they cannot feed themselves. Desperately, they try and try, but they cannot get the fine delicacies into their mouths. The fork is always too long.

In heaven, he continues, there is also a magnificent feast set of the finest meats and vegetables, fruits and cheeses, breads and wines, and there is enough for everyone. And in heaven also everyone gathered at the table is given a fork just long enough so they cannot feed themselves. The difference in heaven is, however, that the people use the long forks to feed one another. They lovingly choose the finest morsels of the heavenly feast, *and feed their neighbors across the table.*

Friends, while few of us are Olympic champions, as Socrates once said, "Everyone is fighting a hard battle..." and we are called to be champions of faith. Together, we remind one another, and all people, that we are beloved children. And as we learn to serve one another, to love our neighbors, even our enemies, we live into our calling to be imitators of God. Here today, believe God's grace and love is for you. There is enough for everyone because Jesus assures us, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me shall not hunger. Whoever believes in me shall not thirst."

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