

Pentecost 11, proper 13. August 5, 2018. St. Augustine's in-the-Woods Episcopal Church, Freeland WA. Nigel Taber-Hamilton. Exodus 16:2-4,9-15; Psalm 78:23-29; Ephesians 4:1-16 John 6:24-35

His name is "JB". He's just soooo cute! Most of the time. JB is a baby beaver being fostered by a friend of Rachel's from her time in Alaska. JB was alone when found - no family - and too small to remain outside. His foster mom rehabs wild animals. This is the first time she's rehab-ed a beaver. At first, some of his behavior puzzled her - he would find things all over the house - carpets, shoes, her daughter's lacrosse stick - anything moveable, and drag them to particular places: in front of the sink, in front of the washing machine, in the doorway to the bathroom. Then she figured out what he was doing - perhaps you can, too. He knew where there was water, and he was trying to build a dam! Then he started in on the skirting boards, and the door posts - so far he's done going on \$1,000 of damage. Eventually - pretty soon, she hopes - he'll go to an outside enclosure and pond.

Then there's the vet Rachel and I know from Bloomington IN - she specializes in cats and rabbits. Rabbits are tricky - when it comes especially to spaying them, the mortality rate is extremely high, so most vets won't take the chance. Sue figured out why, and now, when she spays a rabbit, she make sure that there are rolled-up towels around them when they wake up from the anaesthesia, so that they wake up upright, not on their sides.

And then there's open-heart surgery patients. Anxiety, depression and other emotional complications are very common, post-surgery. No matter how well the surgery goes, how well everything starts to heal, there's a high likelihood that those complications will occur. But they can be avoided.

All three of these stories are connected. The beaver – anyone guess what the J in JB stands for? "Justin," as in "Justin Beaver" - the beaver was acting from instinct. There are lots of definitions of that word: Miriam Webster says "***a largely inheritable and unalterable tendency of an organism to make a complex and specific response to environmental stimuli without involving reason.***" Or maybe it's "genetic memory" - the idea that common experiences of a species become incorporated into that species' genetic code.

The rabbit? When rabbits wake up on their sides, with the feeling of an incision in their guts, they appear to believe they've been knocked over by a predator and have been partially eviscerated. The next inevitable event will be the coup-de-gras: death. So they give up. They die.

Open-heart patients? They may know in their minds that what just happened was good and positive, but instinct, genetic memory, says something like "the only way you could have ended up with this huge incision in your chest is courtesy of a Sabre-toothed tiger - or some other predator." And back then – perhaps 300,000 years ago, such an incision meant you were gonna die. Pretty easy to give up under those circumstances. So the smart thing to do in today's world is tell the patient BEFORE the surgery that no matter what they think about the surgery, their body is most likely going to respond to their genetic memory, to the possibility they've been eviscerated by a predator! Knowing that turns out to help a great deal.

Most of you are probably familiar with the “fight-or-flight” response – it’s also called also called *hyper-arousal*, or the *acute stress response*. The generally accepted theory around this is that animals react to threats with a general discharge of the sympathetic nervous system, preparing them for fighting or fleeing. It was a learned response that’s become instinctual. And – we know – it’s become instinctual for human beings, too (we are, after all, animals)!

Love is an instinct. We humans have learned over the many thousands of years of human consciousness of the powerful, positive effects on human identity and behavior of compassion and caring for others, of love in its more-than-romantic sense. And we have learned of the significant and powerful force-for-good of an enduring and committed relationship with the Divine.

The flip side is also true. A selfish, self-centered, cruel, violent life is ultimately destructive of the human person. You don’t end up with PTSD as a result of an orientation to love, and compassion and care for others, but living a life centered in violence and destruction certainly makes you a good candidate! And that’s so, it appears, because you are going against human instinctual behavior; you’re fighting yourself.

Religious sentiment is an instinct. How did it get that way? Philosophers go back to the dawn of human consciousness and point to the flourishing of human community in the presence of religious sentiment, and the failure of human community in its absence. More recently, and living out of a Christian identity, Thomas Aquinas said that faith is a fundamental tendency, within each soul, for self-transcendence and worship of the God in whose image the soul has been created. Since Aquinas the exploration of a faith-instinct has taken up a great deal of time and much effort by theologians and philosophers. What’s not in question by most is its existence. As one writer, David Foster Wallace, has said:

*“In the day-to day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship.”*

The journey we as human beings are invited on is one that’s inevitable for every human being – inevitable but also precarious: our search for the proper object of our human faith-instinct. Wallace continued:

*“.....[T]he compelling reason for.....choosing some sort of god or spiritual-type thing to worship – be it [Jesus Christ] or Allah, be it YHWH or the Wiccan Mother Goddess, or the Four Noble Truths, or some inviolable set of ethical principles....[the compelling reason] is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive. If you worship money and things, if they are where you tap real meaning in life, then you will never have enough, never feel you have enough..... Worship your body and beauty and sexual allure and you will always feel ugly. And when time and age start showing, you will die a million deaths before they finally grieve you..... . . .Worship power, [and] you will end up feeling weak and afraid, and you will need ever more power over others to numb you to your own fear. Worship your intellect, being seen as smart, [and] you will end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out.....”*

For us, who name Jesus Christ as our lord and savior, perhaps the question from this is “why Jesus?” There’s such a massive array of substitute objects surrounding us, which are all trying their very best to convince us, subtly or not so subtly, to give them our absolute commitment.

One answer is that we were brought up within this faith tradition; that our “faith instinct” was nurtured by it, supported by it, fed by it – which certainly adds real power to the metaphor of today’s gospel passage about the Holy Feeding. It chose us, rather than the other way around. And it continues to nurture us. “Faith comes through hearing,” says St. Paul, and he didn’t just mean auditory “hearing”! Rather, he meant our Christian faith is birthed and grows – our faith instinct is activated – when we encounter those who are walking the walk, not only talking the talk of Jesus Christ. The passage from the Letter to the Ephesians is perhaps the greatest resource in this regard - well worth pinning up on the wall. It reminds us of what’s at stake, what’s at the heart of our faith, and it reminds us of the great gift we’ve been given.

It’s a divine gift to us – to be able to “hear”. We honor that divine gift by being generous about the content of our believing when it comes to those who are seeking. Do you have to believe everything I say about faith? No! Everything the Church says about faith? No! Hopefully, what we say is a doorway into the developing of your faith instinct, and offers you the possibility of an encounter with the Divine that will be rich, and rewarding, and, ultimately, transforming.

Why stay? Some don’t. We all know people who have sojourned with us for a while – some of them are still around. My answer is that my “faith instinct” is activated when I hear words like Peter’s response to Jesus, who wondered on one occasion if his disciples also wished to leave him, along with those others who found his teachings too difficult. “To whom can we go?” Peter said, “You have the words of eternal life.”(John 6:68)

Those words whisper to us in the gentle breezes of our faith journey; occasionally they shout, but mostly it’s a whisper. My prayer for you is that you listen to the song being played in the breeze,, and that you, too, hear in Jesus, the words of eternal life.