

We Will With God's Help!

Scripture is, for me, experiential. I was reminded of this with the first teaching in Thomas a Kempis' The Imitation of Christ: "I would rather *feel* compunction, than know how to define it."

This is the way of the path of the heart. Those ancient stories occur as if in my life today, to teach and guide. All the scriptures today offer rich food as spiritual guidance.

Elijah fled into the wilderness because of the carnage and political distress of his time. We can all identify with this! He had done God's will in great deeds and had slain the false prophets. When King Ahab described to his wife, Jezebel, Elijah's great deeds, she issued a decree that Elijah be killed the following day. He fled beyond Beersheba, safely outside the jurisdiction of Jezebel, where he stopped, exhausted and empty, too weak to continue to bear the prophetic burden which God had placed upon him.

How often in our lives do we feel we have carried on as far as we can go, even with our faith? How we long for the presence of God to carry us farther!

Elijah was sustained by God with food, drink, and the touch of an angel to preserve him for the journey to come of 40 days and 40 nights. We, too, receive nourishment in the presence of God. Support from messengers he sends to lift us in our troubles.

David had been held captive, survived, and escaped only by feigning madness. Having escaped with his life he arrived safely to a cave and in our portion of Psalm 34 responds with a joyous proclamation of love of God. What a beautiful reaction this is to such an experience!

It is easy to remain captive to things that hurt us, words, thoughts, memories or negative actions which seek to destroy. As followers of Jesus the Christ, it is our responsibility, however, to actively seek to escape from negative thinking. To work diligently to come ever closer and to live more fully in the light of Christ. It is our responsibility, and a sacred gift, to heal.

In Ephesians we have a veritable users' manual for how to live a life as imitators of Christ. It is reminiscent of the renouncing of sin in our Baptismal vows. This reading points to the transformation of those who are in Christ, putting away a former way of life.

As I speak, please know in your hearts how great a struggle it is for me to learn to live in this way. We are imperfect vessels of God and are reminded by this Epistle how being in Christ works. *(The underscored items are paraphrased from the scripture.)*

Put away falsehood, speak truth to each other "for we are members of one another. My first draft had a typo: "falseFOOD". This little mistake led me to a different way to approach this part of the scripture. If we feed each other falsehoods, nurture hurt feelings and anger, manipulate and tear down others, what do we become? Not children of a merciful, compassionate God.

Be angry but do not sin. It is truly difficult to face adversity, to receive projected anger, without sinning in our response, but it is necessary that we constantly endeavor to do so by taking a step back to avoid emotional hooks, by taking a deep breath and centering in Christ before responding. Anger is at times appropriate. Hanging onto anger can be corrosive to our hearts and to a community.

Give up stealing; labor, work and share with the needy. In addition to the face value of these items I will point out that speaking negatively about our common life, about each other, laying blame or scapegoating an individual are equivalent to stealing from the community in Christ. We must pay clear attention to the needs of others both within and outside of our church community. Acknowledging that someone feels hurt, but not agreeing to remain in a hurtful perspective; offering instead a way through to healing.

Let no evil talk come out of your mouth. Well, this one alone would prevent most of the others from ever occurring! How hard it is to stop before blurting out something clever, sarcastic, critical, judgmental or negative. How much happier we would all be, individually and collectively, if we each sought to speak to each other in the presence of God!

Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God . . . put away wrangling, anger, slander, malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving, as God in Christ has forgiven you. Ah! Forgiveness!!! The most difficult of all for when we forgive, we must first forgive ourselves and cannot expect the other to accept our forgiveness. We can only find peace in our own hearts and share it as others will allow.

Be imitators of God, as beloved children, live in love, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. Would we interact with each other differently if we emitted an actual fragrance when we were in Christ? What if we could all *literally* smell the difference? From this moment forward, let us behave as if this were possible!

A list like this can seem overwhelming. What is the sacrifice in doing these simple things? What price would we have to pay to succeed in them?

We would have to:

Put our egos in service of a higher good,

Let go our false need to control, for having control is an illusion and our need to do so represents a wound that needs to be healed.

Forego petty self-righteousness, i.e., thinking we know better than someone else. This is spiritual pride and is not an accurate reflection of the way God works in a community.

Allow ourselves to consider each other outside our normal assumption-based way of thinking, i.e., consider each other in Christ.

As a congregation we have greatly benefitted from consistently applying these ideals. I hope we can improve their application, to preserve the practice of living and worshipping in the heart and mind of Christ. I hope we come to exude the very fragrance of the Holy Spirit so that our lives in Christ are apparent to all.

Silence

This moment of silence was intentional. It is the way this Gospel reading was introduced to me. It begins: "I am the bread of life" and later clarifies "I am the living bread." Jesus is the center of faith to which God draws us. It was intimidating to put into words my sense of a scripture which repeatedly caused me to fall into utter silence!

Previous to this passage, Jesus has just fed the multitudes. He served, taught, and provided for a huge number of people. He now moves on to a more intimate teaching to those who have been following him.

Even while Jesus was speaking some of the Jews were grumbling. They understood the laws and words with their heads but had not come to live his words in their hearts. As good Jews they believed there is only one God, period. They had been taught this all their lives. They thought that Jesus was speaking above himself -- instead of hearing a new way in the beauty and healing of his theology. There is an abrupt breakdown in communication here. Although his followers, they have failed to recognize him as the Son of God.

When are we like these grumblers? Hearing with what we have always known, or with what is literal, instead of listening with hearts open and ready to receive God's word and be changed forever.

Here Jesus offers an invitation to the Jews, and now to us, to come to him: They are to forsake the narrower ways of Judaism. We are all to forsake our own cultures and enter a radical Christian understanding of the world. Achieving this can only happen by God's invitation. As we say in response to the questions of the Baptismal Liturgy, "We will with God's help!"

Jesus is the bread of life. The bread and wine are his body and blood, as he has told us. Then what are we? Consoled, strengthened, inspired, or transformed?

We are more than mere recipients. We must be transformed by the act of taking in the Christ. We do it every Sunday, yet this action must not ever become mundane. I'm sure you have heard the statement, "You are what you eat!"

As we come to the altar and receive "the Body of Christ, the Bread of Heaven" and "the Blood of Christ, the cup of Salvation", remember that you are what you eat! Transformed into Christ for each other and the world. Let us make it so.

We will with God's help!