

August 8, 2021 - Pentecost 11

So like I said a week ago, we all have need for regular reminders.

The transition from the lectionary readings of last Sunday to this one illustrate that well. Jesus is repeating and expanding upon his use of the “Bread of Life” metaphor for guiding our faith in him and relationship to God.

And in the letter to the Ephesians, the writer is speaking again on the importance of speaking the *truth* to one another in community.

That will serve us well here today, but what might not is the style of writing in the Ephesians text. Maybe you noticed it reads like a list of “do”s and “don’t”s.

This after we heard Jesus tell us don’t try to “do,” but simply believe.

So what to make of this?

By believing, maybe we come not to what we must *do*, but what we are made to *be*.

The letter to the Ephesians is written to a community of people trying to live with one another and finding that difficult enough, nevertheless reckoning with a chaotic world beyond their own circle. Sound familiar?

These words are intended to reach their audiences, from the time they were first jotted down, not as new information or instruction, but as reminder and also as encouragement. We begin this passage with “putting away falsehood,” an assumed already-underway activity. It describes the organization of Christian communities in a fashion, supporting one another and detangling from the unhealthy ways in which people had found to cope, in their dealings with the structures of social life. Lies, manipulation and deception had worked ... but not well. That ultimately sets

each up for failure but together people finding their identity bound up in Christ were forging a new way.

It's a process. And not a smooth one. While this is playing out, integral to becoming truth-tellers to the world and in the world, comes the difficult task of telling the truth to one another. And sometimes those are hard truths. This reality and this struggle are timeless.

We are caught now in a difficult time of transition. We all know the world is changing around us in adaptation to the COVID-19 pandemic but it wasn't exactly a calm and serene scene before this. Political divisions were growing, social tensions were stewing and technology was already developing at a break-neck pace that can make it hard to keep up. Difficult conversations and relationships to navigate have only grown more delicate at best, and shut off -- with suspicion abounding -- much of the time.

It's more than anyone can handle. Contrary to popular belief, God allows for that situation to arise. For us to face more than we can handle. But we do not face it alone. And we do not have to handle it alone.

God is with us and God gives us one another as a gift. Ephesians doesn't drop its designs on human behavior without also leaving a foundation in place. We are members of one another. We are the body of Christ and as the lesson taught us last week, we are each designed as a member of that body with different abilities and functions. But sometimes that body aches. Some of the members need more attention than others. Some will downright irritate the rest of the body to no end.

But we belong to one another. Our body can have a trick knee, a lazy eye, crooked teeth and a bruised shin but if it is ours, we have to love it. Oh, it will frustrate us and sometimes it will let us down and lead us to tears. But

ultimately, we give thanks for it. As it changes, even when it loses some its strength, we learn to love it again, maybe in a different way. We learn how to treat it ... often by trying a hundred variations on what doesn't work before finding what does.

It is that treatment of speaking the truth that's an absolute necessity for the body but it's really an art and a science. The vessel in which it's delivered, the manner, the dosage, there's a lot of variables that have to come together so it doesn't spit right back out with disgust. And unfortunately it's a lot harder than just asking "What Would Jesus Do?"

Sometimes Jesus gets a little too sugar-coated. If we believe he is sinless, we must also believe that it isn't necessarily a sin to be not-nice. Jesus was not always nice to his persecutors, nor to strangers, nor to his nearest and dearest. Applying Jesus' words and tone in certain situations

to every situation isn't going to work. The next time someone cuts in front of you in line at the grocery store, don't shout at them, "Get behind me, Satan!" You won't get to leave with a smug grin as if you've done the Lord's work but rather you'll be lucky if you don't leave with a black eye.

Yet there is a time for giving tough love and Jesus knew that. But he also had a sense of timing I don't think any of us is ever going to pick up. But we can know that there is a time for gentle words, a gentle touch, a strong push or just a strong, silent presence. Sometimes we are going to bring the wrong tool for the job and that's when we have to let grace and forgiveness have the last words.

And we have to work on doing better as members of one another in the body of Christ because we can't have the focus of the world beyond be on our body's loud, arrogant and hypocritical mouth. Do as I say and not as I do, doesn't work. But if we can be seen as a body that heals, that

reconciles, that learns from our mistakes and doesn't try to hide our scars in shame, we don't have to shout a message to rise above the cacophony of other, mixed messages and exhausting noise.

But we can't hide it under a bushel, either. No. The Lutheran expression of Christ's church is traditionally humble, quiet, modest. All admirable qualities ... in some regards. But we could also afford to poke our heads a bit farther out from our shells sometimes. Doing good works doesn't make us good – that's at the core of our theology – but it can make us excited about what God is doing in and among us and it's OK to say so and allow others to recognize that.

Sometimes we have a perspective on things that could be useful if we shared it. Such as that the world is not just black or white. And not necessarily always gray, either. But can be black AND white.

That it is just that thieves stop stealing and need to take on honest work. But also that people have been backed into corners where crime becomes a manner of survival and we are responsible for removing barriers to reform and turning one's life around. That we can have a childlike faith in our wonder and enthusiasm for God but that childlike faith cannot mean arresting our development in an immature state. We can love the Lord our God with all our hearts AND all our minds.

And we can accept Jesus' sacrifice for us as both beautiful and tragic. A fragrant offering but inseparable from the scent of death. The cross a brutal weapon of earthly power and a symbol of unconventional heavenly power that overcomes that inhumanity. It's as good of a reminder as any there is. And for that, thanks be to God. Amen.