

1 Kings 8 [1, 6, 10-11], 22-30, 41-43

Psalm 84

Ephesians 6:10-20

John 6: 56-69

In the Name of the One Holy and Living God.+ Amen.

Good morning! As our Psalm says, happy are we who put our trust in God, and happy am I to see your smiling faces today! It is good to be back. And maybe it's because I've missed the opportunity to serve and preach these three weeks away on vacation, or maybe it's just the luck of the draw in our scripture readings today, but we are blessed with an embarrassment of riches in our lessons this morning. There are sermons and more sermons wanting to be preached today! How to discern the right sermon for this day?

Are we to delve into the radical message of 1 Kings, asking God's inclusive mercy and blessing over the prayers of strangers, foreigners, those "not of the house of Israel?" Or do we turn to the powerful protection to be found for all champions of prayer in Ephesians 6, reminding us at all times to "put on the whole armor of God?" Or is it the beautiful Psalm 84, welcoming even the lowliest to find their home, their rest and peace, at God's altar – the Psalm put to heart-melting music by our own Jane Holt and Sean Jackson, which we'll get to hear as our offertory anthem later this morning.

Or finally is it our Gospel text, in which Jesus gives his disciples the disturbing directive to eat his flesh and drink his blood, and live forever. All of our scripture today turns us toward facing difficult truths – things "hard to hear" - either because they're so powerful, so personal, so true, or so disturbing that we might rather like to talk about less personal but still important news – like the wonderful news last week that the Lutheran Church and the Methodist Church have adopted an agreement bringing both churches into full communion with one another, and that the ELCA has voted to remove the prior rule of celibacy for their gay clergy.

Then there is the hopeful news that the presidential election in Afghanistan continues to proceed, thanks to the incredible courage of the Afghani people, or the sad news that the horrific mudslides in China have caused such suffering among our brothers and sisters there. We have much to think and talk about this morning, but it is August in this very warm sanctuary, and the Holy Spirit, in her wisdom, has moved me to try to weave it all together by looking at the common thread that we find in the things Jesus challenges us to consider, all things "hard to hear," as his disciples said in our Gospel text today.

In this sixth chapter of John's Gospel – relatively early on in his ministry - Jesus' followers are still grumbling among themselves about what Jesus might have meant by the teachings they had recently heard. *"I am the bread of life,"* he said... *"the bread that I will give for the life of the*

*world is my flesh...*” They didn’t understand. And so Jesus puts it into graphic language for them: he says, *“those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.”* But the disciples responded by saying, *“This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?”* What could it mean, to eat and drink him? They had hardly begun to really hear his words equating the manna sent from God to save their forefathers with his own human incarnation sent to rescue them. They could hardly hear it, much less understand it.

Perhaps the more difficult passage to hear, though, comes a bit later in our Gospel today. Our scripture tells us that Jesus said, *“For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father.”* It is much like the very challenging words found later in John’s Gospel, in chapter 14 verse 6: *“No one comes to the Father except by me.”* At first glance in both statements, it appears that Jesus is saying that only through knowledge and full understanding of Christ Jesus are the world’s children received home again when their time has come. That is certainly the understanding that I grew up with, and it is surely a passage that has caused such heartache for those who haven’t had the privilege of knowing him. But thankfully we always have the original language of our scripture to turn to for help.

The Greek text is clear that the word used in both statements that we have translated as meaning “by” is the word “*dia*,” which actually means “through.” *Through what God did* in Jesus, and *through what Jesus did* for the sins of the whole world, the gates of eternal life were opened, once for all. The stranger, the sparrow, the prayer-champion in full armor; the ones who understand, and the ones who don’t – Jesus became the gate, the key, The Way - to life everlasting for all of them.

Because, you see, Jesus didn’t come to make us comfortable, did he? He made it his mission to weave this same recognizable, uncomfortable thread throughout the whole cloth of his work on earth: to say those truths that are hard to hear. An itchy thread that reminds us to tell the truth out of love, like he did. To challenge a broken status quo, and to turn the norm upside down if necessary. He challenged the religious and governmental authorities, and stood up against what had become dead and corrupt.

And he continues to call us to do the same: to not settle for pat answers or the party line, but to study and listen and hear what he said; to wrestle with our understanding of what he did; to challenge our paradigms, to broaden our possibilities. His reach from the cross was wider than we will ever understand; his love for us broader than we can ever imagine. And his commission to us as Christians, to go and do likewise, is the ultimate challenge: to do what our sixth century St. Augustine reminds us to do today at the communion rail: *“Become what you receive: the Body of Christ, given for the world.”* Become the Body of Christ: for all the hopeful opportunities here at St. John’s Church; for Habitat for Humanity about to build here in Stamford; for Haiti, as a missionary this Autumn; for the peacemaking work of interfaith dialogue at Abraham’s Table gatherings, coming up soon. We have such a bounty of useful gifts to give, and work to do, as the Body of Christ in the world today.

We as God’s children come from all corners of life, from every nation and culture on this fragile earth, our island home. We may seem strange or different to each other, and we might find ourselves, our different cultures, offended, like the disciples were, by each other’s customs, or by what Jesus really said, by what he really did. But thanks be to him, we all meet eventually – strangers, sparrows, prayer champions in their armor; ones who understand and

ones who don't; ones who love, and ones who hate - we all meet eventually, at the foot of the cross, the entrance to eternal life. And it is from this place that we must remember to follow his example, and choose The Way of love, and truth even if it is hard to hear, out of gratitude for everything given us by our Lord, Christ Jesus.

Amen.

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