

Daniel Tate Sermon, August 25, 2024, Sunday, St Ambrose, Foster City, CA

Lectionary: Joshua 24:1-2a,14-18, Psalm 34:15-22, Ephesians 6:10-20, John 6:56-69

In the name of the Father and of the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

The prophet Joshua gives the Israelites a message from God. A choice. Serve the one God and be strong, or serve all those little gods and be weak and isolated. This is another version of the Hebrew Shema prayer "Listen, Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord is One. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might" (Deuteronomy 6:4-5). When the people choose this, they become one with God, and they become one with each other.

Jesus builds on this in John. He says, "those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me and I in them," and "It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless." Earlier, Jesus multiplied five loaves of bread and two fish, fed five thousand people, and then he walked on water. After that he got away by himself to pray, but then they tracked him down again. Maybe the people think that if they keep hanging around, Jesus will keep giving them free meals and entertainment. So, when Jesus says they need to eat his flesh and drink blood, he is clarifying things. He is not only about the miracles or about supplying temporary things that help us get by from day to day. He's not a trick pony. It's his message. He is saying that we need to eat and drink his words, live the example of his life. It's about salvation and eternal life. The message is that they, we need to believe that he is the Messiah, sent from God. He says it from many different angles in this chapter and they still don't get it. So, he gets really symbolic and blunt and says that they need to eat his flesh and drink his blood. Many of them say, no thank you, and they go away. It's not an easy message to believe, that God the Father sent Jesus, God became flesh, to be flesh among us, so we could be together with God. Jesus says if we take him, God the Father, and the Holy Spirit in ourselves, we abide in him, and when we do so, we also abide with each other.

It takes faith to believe this, and sometimes faith is hard. Jesus offers a choice like Joshua does. He says to the twelve disciples, "do you wish to go away too?" They choose to stay. One has to take a risk, be brave to believe that we can be one with God and one with each other. It's vulnerable. It's intimate.

There is an epidemic of loneliness in the world. Every day as a chaplain, I see people in the hospital or in hospice care facilities, or in their homes. Some are isolated. Some have large dedicated families who care for them. Most have professional caregivers, plus nurses, social workers, doctors, and more, caring for their physical needs. Some caregivers care for their spiritual needs too. But whether patients have a lot of support or not is not always an indicator if they're lonely or not. Some are happy and content even when they are alone, despite terrible illness. Some are lonely and unhappy when they seemingly have all the support they need. Some give up. Some can't see a way out after having experienced long trauma after trauma, and need help and so we hope and pray that they get that help and are open to it when it comes, and that the grace of God intervenes and gives them that help. God has certainly intervened in my life when I couldn't help myself, or couldn't ask. I imagine you can remember when God did so in a time of crisis in your life too.

But we are connected to God and to each other even when we feel we are not. We just are. God gave us that from the beginning. Loneliness is an illusion. Jesus is saying that all we have to do is believe and know that we are connected to God and with each other, and to reach out, and to be vulnerable. This is easy to say. Still, there is loneliness, especially when our loved ones die, or a friendship breaks down, or we are abandoned, or we when we make mistakes, or betray ourselves, or feel shame. When we are lonely, there are actions we can take. Our Psalm gives us practical suggestions. Psalms are prayers, and prayer always helps. And in this one it says, "The eyes of the Lord are upon the righteousness, his ears are open to their cry," meaning, it's okay to cry and ask for help. God encourages us to be vulnerable, to be open about our fears and ask for help, even whine and complain and rage if we have to. All emotions directed toward God are acceptable and good. Patients who are open and honest about their feelings, and ask for what they need, get the most attention. The Psalmist is also encouraging us to believe. "None will be punished who trust in him."

Paul's letter to the Ephesians helps us too. He tells us to be truthful, righteousness, peaceful and to spread peace, to be faithful, to believe in the salvation that Jesus offers, to read scripture and pray. When we do these things, we arm ourselves and protect our minds and our spirits from loneliness and despair. When we take on these protections, we can have joy no matter what our circumstances. There are patients who are joyful and grateful despite terrible pain. I visited a woman who had breast cancer, had a mastectomy, then after chemotherapy it went into submission. But then it came back, spreading all through her body. She had terrible pain in her spine and back that medication could barely contain. Yet, when I saw her, she was grateful for her life, her family, all that she had experienced. She described a drive she took out in to the country by herself. She stopped by a long sloping field of grasses that led to the ocean, and stared at it, soaking it in. The grasses were swaying in the wind, and as she watched, she felt the presence of God, and she understood that it was time to die, and she came to peace about it. She then decided not to have any more aggressive treatment. She had her family who loved and supported her unconditionally, and she had her faith and prayer practices. All of these things make her one with God and with her people, and with me and the rest of the hospital staff because she shared her feelings with us. She had become one with nature and with God as she watched the grasses flow. We are one with the earth, the animals, and plants and birds and the cosmos and God, even if we sometimes forget it.

Another thing Jesus has to say to us today is "it is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless." This is a profound statement. This is true on one level, that the flesh is useless. I remember years ago walking in the woods with my mother behind their house in Washington State talking about my father's health and his need in the near future for another heart surgery. One thing she said that I'll never forget is "the body will always fail you." She was a nurse, so she knew up close the truth of this. All of our bodies will fail us eventually. It is the spirit that gives the body life. Another word for the spirit is breath. A normal breathing rate for an adult twelve to twenty breaths a minute. For infants, its thirty to sixty breaths.¹ We have to breathe all the time to live.

¹ "Rapid Shallow Breathing," Medline Plus, accessed August 23, 2024, <https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/007198.htm#:~:text=A%20normal%20breathing%20rate%20for,to%2060%20breaths%20per%20minute>

We have to have the spirit, all the time to live. When we take our last breath, our flesh is useless. There is no more life in that body. It won't move.

But is the flesh useless? It seems pretty useful to me. Jesus became flesh and became one of us. He used his flesh well. He changed the world forever. All of us here have physical bodies that brought us here. To me the body is just as important as the spirit. Paul says in Corinthians that our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). God is pulsing through our bodies. Our bodies have feelings and they trigger emotions, conscious or unconscious. To me our emotions are of the divine, they influence our spirits, our souls. The dark painful emotions of depression, anxiety, fear, and grief, can cause despair. And when we despair, we can be tempted to give up. But the dark emotions can be great teachers if we face them, work through them and let them heal us and help us grow.² We can also experience the emotions of love, ecstasy and joy and move to higher spiritual realms. Our bodies are gifts from God. God is in our bodies.

Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese Buddhist monk expands on this. He said that all of our ancestors are still alive in our bodies with their weaknesses and with their strengths. The universe is in our bodies, the earth, the sun, the moon, the stars. We are made of sunshine, of fresh water, of fresh air. The body is a masterpiece.³

It is easy to forget that we have a body. If we are thinking about what we don't have or about the future or the past, we are not present in our body. We are not living now. Focusing on our breath, our spirit can return us to the present, return us to our bodies. What we do with our bodies, what happens to our bodies helps or hurts the spirit in us. We are alive, our bodies and our spirits are one, and we are one with each other and with God. We are not alone. We need to eat the flesh of Jesus and drink his blood.

² Greenspan, Miriam. *Healing through the Dark Emotions: The Wisdom of Grief, Fear, and Despair*. 1st ed. Boston, Mass: Shambhala Publications, 2003.

³ "How Do I Love Myself? | Thich Nhat Hanh Answers Questions," Plum Village, accessed August 23, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gMoRtJhVoxc>