

“Live in Love”
Grace Episcopal Church
Proper 14
11th Sunday after Pentecost
Rev. Brian C Justice

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Psalm 34.1-8
1 Kings 19.4-8
Ephesians 4.25-5.2
John 6.35, 41-51

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“Be imitators of God ... and live in love,
As Christ loved us and gave himself up for us ...”
Amen.

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The readings in this section of the Lectionary raise two questions.

The first question is ...

What kind of a God is God?
I.e., who – or what – is this God
that we name, that we adore, that we follow?

(As we heard last week) ...

The journey of the Israelites through the wilderness in the Book of Exodus ...

(And as we have just heard today) ...

The withdrawal of Elijah to the solitary broom tree in the desert in 1 Kings ...

The instructions of Paul (or a disciple of Paul) in the Letter to the Ephesians ...

And, above all, the deeds and the words of Jesus with the crowd on the shores of the Galilee in the Gospel of John ...

... The question of *deity* is central here.

And these readings reveal who and what God is.
God is Love.

God is Love who creates and cares for us.

God gives us the gift of life.

And from the unfailing fields of divine love,
God gives us Bread ... the Bread of Life.

The bread that fortifies our bodies.

The bread that feeds our souls.

The bread that *is* life ... abundant, eternal life in God.

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The second question is ...

What kind of *community* are *we* called to be?

I.e., what kind of person am *I* called to be?

What kind of person are *you* called to be?

What kind of people are *we* called to be *together*?

... The question of *community* is not explicitly stated in any of these biblical texts, but it is at the heart of the matter. It is the question that the Israelites, that Elijah, that the disciples and the crowd at Galilee, that the church at Ephesus, and that we – you and I! – must ask.

Of course, the answer to the question is already given to us!

But like the Israelites in the wilderness, Elijah, the crowd at Galilee, the church at Ephesus, we may miss it.

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In today's reading from 1 Kings, the prophet Elijah has withdrawn to the desert in despair. Jezebel, the wicked Queen of northern kingdom of Israel, decrees that Elijah should die because he exposed her Canaanite deity, Baal, as nothing but a phantasm, an apparition, a false idol.

Afraid of assassination, Elijah is ready to give away the gift of life and die right there in the desert. And yet God provides for him. God gives the Bread of Life that sustains Elijah, allowing him to journey forth to Mount Horeb (Sinai) and then back to the kingdom of Israel to work in the community there, to serve among the people of God.

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In today's reading from John, the crowd is still with Jesus at the Sea of Galilee.

The crowd witnesses a "sign" as Jesus feeds the five thousand with bread and fish.

They follow him across the sea to question him and demand bread ... "Give us this bread!" they cry.

Jesus says to them, "I am the Bread of Life."

The local community is – understandably! – bewildered by such language because, in their minds, they *have known* Jesus. He is, to them, just a local kid.

"Isn't this Jesus? ... We know his parents!"

But, filled with compassion for them, Jesus does not abandon them.

He stays with them.

He instructs them.

He feeds them.

With the Love that is the Bread of Life, he feeds them.

He says, "Do not complain among yourselves" ... rather, believe what you are seeing with your own eyes!

Jesus feeds the crowd – *feeds us* – with the Bread of Life.

And this has implications of how *we* (who have been fed) should live ...

In feeding the people, Jesus is showing them – *and showing us* – what kind of people they are called to be ... what kind of community we are called to be.

In today's reading from Ephesians, the author draws out the implications of what Jesus is doing and teaching.

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St Paul continues describes what it means to be fed by Christ, to live in Christ, particularly, to live as a *community* in Christ.

He describes a community that cares for another,
that serves one another,

that sacrifices for another,
that feeds one another with and in love.

“We are members of one another.”

“Labor and work ... so as to share with the needy.”

“Be kind to one another ... be tender-hearted.”

“Be imitators of God.”

“And live in love, as Christ loved us ... giving himself up for us ...”

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In the 4th century, when Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, men and women left the towns and cities and went to the deserts of Egypt, Judea, and Syria. They went to live in Christian community.

The advent of the Desert Fathers and Desert Mothers was the advent of Christian monasticism.

Thomas Merton, the well-known and well-loved Trappist monk and author of the 20th century, wrote a poem about one of the Desert Fathers, Macarius, and his community.

“Macarius The Younger”
From Emblems in a Season of Fury (1961)

*Now one day someone brought a bunch of grapes
To Macarius (in the desert) at Scete.*

He, forgetful of his own thirst, took the grapes to another who was unwell.

*He, in turn, happy and thanking God for so much love,
Took the grapes to yet another.*

*So the grapes went from cell to cell, all around the desert,
No one knowing where they first started.*

*Until at length one (of the monks) came to Macarius saying,
Here, Father, are good grapes, takes them, they will refresh you.*

This lovely and loving scene of the monks in the desert shows what St Paul is teaching us and shows who God is calling us to be ...

... a community where, in feeding our neighbors, we are fed ourselves ...
 where, in helping our neighbors, we help ourselves ...
 where, in loving our neighbors, we love God and love ourselves ...

This is a community that is *alive* ... Alive with love. Alive in love.

So in love with God and with one another that – even for a moment – we forget ourselves and for the sake of the other.

This is our calling.

This is the answer to the question before us in our Lectionary readings in this season: what kind of community are we called to be?

A community that shares “fresh grapes” with one another ...
 that breaks bread with one another ...
 that visits with one another ...
 that welcomes the stranger ...
 that respects the worth and dignity of every human being ...

A community that labors and works and sacrifices and shares, like we try to do through “Goochland Cares,” our partner in the neighborhood that provides food, clothing, medical and dental care, emergency housing, and more to those in need ...

A community that is kind, is tenderhearted ...

A community that imitates God ...

A community that “lives in love ... as Christ loved us ... giving himself up for us...”

A community *of* love.

A community *in* love

Amen.