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John 6:51-58  
Proverbs 9:1-6  
Psalm 34:9-14  
Ephesians 5:15-20

August 15, 2021  
The Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

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Has anyone noticed that over the last few weeks we have been lingering on the 6<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Gospel of John? If you are been paying attention you might think that every week sounds strangely similar. In fact, this is week 4 of a 5 week deep dive into what we often call the Bread of Life discourse. And, we will get to that in a minute but, first, I want to tell you a story. So hang with me as we move into the heart of John chapter 6 through the journey of horse named Rocky.

The story I want to tell this morning is every little girl's dream. Actually, let me back up...I can't speak for all little girls...that wouldn't be right. So maybe I should just tell it like it is...this was MY dream as a little girl once upon a time. And it came true on Monday.

Most of you know I have a retired race horse named Rocky. He gave it his all on the track. But the years of hard work and pushing his body day in and day out left him with unbearable pain. He wanted so bad to do good...to be the horse I wanted him to be but his body told us both that his life was best spent in retirement.

I let him out into the fields to live what I thought was the perfect life for him. But as time went on, he just wasn't thriving. He was losing weight and would often stand to the side of the other horses, his head lowered. Maybe resigned to feeling lost and cast away. It was heartbreaking to see. This horse I loved, struggling to keep going.

And so, on Monday, I drove my trailer to pick him up. I pulled into the pasture and saw him at the other end of the field. This is where the moment happened...the moment of little girl dreams. Rocky picked up his head and as soon as he recognized me his ears perked up, he started to trot. Then he got a little faster and a little faster until he was galloping towards me.

I held out my arms to welcome him and when he reached me, he stopped and put his head against my chest. I put his halter on, gave him a peppermint treat (his favorite) and told him he was going to a new home. I think he already knew because as soon as I showed him the ramp into the trailer, he walked right on. Never hesitating. Fully trusting. And, then he breathed and let out a whinny.

When Rocky reached his new home, he walked off the trailer with no drama or fear. He looked around and went right up to his new horse friend in his new field with bright green grass, shady trees, and a warm and loving barn to call home. And then, he walked away into the morning sun with the other horse to graze.

My heart was so full. Rocky was home. He was safe. He was sheltered. He was nurtured. And, deep down, I am positive he knew it as well.

I wanted to spend a little time this morning on Rocky's story because I think it has so much to teach us about our own desire to thrive, to live well, to be loved, to feel safe. And, I want you to notice this...when he was at his lowest, he instinctively ran towards hope.

Rocky made me wrestle with how we all desperately want to be nourished. Yet, sometimes we have been kicked around and beaten up to the point where we are so depleted and bruised that we start to lose hope...hope is goodness, hope in opportunity, and sometimes we lose hope in God.

Our bodies and spirits become tired and broken. We try ways to mask what hurts, to work around the emptiness inside of us. We want so badly to be good, to be the kind of person God wants us to be; but let's face it, it's hard to find meaning out of difficult times...especially when we discover that we have ceased to thrive.

So what do we do? Well, of course, the obvious answer is just have faith...turn to Jesus...put your life in God's hands. That's the answer I am supposed to give as a priest, right? However, I think most of us need a little more than glib evangelism.

Fair enough. So let me put it all on the table for you. As a priest, there is absolutely nothing more in this world that I want for you other than to know you are loved. There is nothing I want more than for you than to feel God in your heart and to trust that no matter how far you may have fallen or how much you have been hurt that there is hope, abundant hope. I want you to know that your life is so precious and God wants you to thrive beyond anything you can ever imagine and God is holding out his arms to welcome you home.

I know the love of God changed my life. I know the love of God held me when I couldn't hold on by myself. I know the love of God has never ever left me, even when I may have left God. And today, I know it's impossible for me to convey how much I want you to know that same kind of hope and love but I sure do want to try.

Our Gospel today is a beautiful treatise from Jesus so graciously telling us how much God longs to nourish us. John chapter 6 tells us over and over again in every way possible what this nourishment feels like. It doesn't come from some far away eternal place that we might get the opportunity to experience some day in the distance, if we do things right and check off a list of boxes towards righteousness. That nourishment is right here, right now if we allow God's love the opportunity to fill our soul with things like forgiveness and mercy, acceptance and grace. That is the bread of life we keep reading about.

When Jesus shares a simple meal, he shares a promise. A promise that is provided to us each and every day that we turn towards Him, when we choose each and every day to walk or run or gallop at full speed towards hope in Christ.

One commentary reframed Jesus' invitation to table this way...

*Listen - there is an even more wonderful, even more nourishing abundance...a meal that will feed your deepest hunger and thirst, the hunger and thirst for wisdom, for true life... And I am that food and drink. I am the embodiment of that wisdom, that life. To the extent that you are alive, you draw your life from me, as branches draw from their vine. So: take your sustenance from me; take me in; drink me in; let me abide in you, and I will let you abide in me.*

Let me abide in you. That's the invitation. And that invitation is extended every single day whether we realize it or not. So when we hunger and thirst for hope, Jesus says come to me and I will nourish you. My arms are open for you.

The bread Jesus talks about isn't a theological discourse to be shifted and analyzed. It's meant to be experienced. It's the tug in our souls that says there is something more. It's the desire to be safely held. It's the mysterious longing of the heart that pulls you forth to run towards God even when you are weak and struggling to keep going.

I know so many of you are feeling depleted right now, worn out by so many challenges that keep coming at us from all sides. Life is uncertain and we are all finding it hard to keep our heads up and our hearts open. And many of us feel a lot like Rocky...malnourished, empty, and tired, waiting for some little light to shine to make things better.

Folks, the light is shining. The hope is there. The nourishment is abundant. God is holding out his arms just for you. Can you run towards that promise?

John encourages us to try, to trust, to lead with our hearts into a home where we can rest and be renewed.

Thanks be to God for the bread of life. Amen.