

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

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

August 18, 2024
The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Essentials and non-essentials. I want to have a very frank conversation with you this morning about these two things. Ever since I came back from sabbatical, this is all I can think about. My time away, walking day after day, gave me an important opportunity....the opportunity to focus on the essential things I needed for each day. The list was short. Food, water, comfortable shoes and clothes, a backpack, and a trail map. That's it.

Do you know what I didn't need? Email, social media, 24/7 news feeds, or Amazon Prime. There was no one telling me what to think or what to wear or what to do. Instead, my news came in the form of the sunrise telling me it was time to get up, the number of clouds in the sky that would determine what to wear, the sensation of hunger when it was time to eat, the fatigue in my legs when it was time to rest.

Basic rhythms that brought me smack dab into the present moment...right to the essentials. And everything else that I had previously held so tightly to seemed oddly out of step.

Ever since I got back, the non-essentials seem grossly evident but I had to strip everything away in order to finally recognize the difference. It made me wonder...how did we get to this place where discerning the difference between the essentials and non-essentials has become so difficult? What would stand out to us if you took the time to slow down long enough to notice?

I can almost guarantee that whatever you discover is going to feel completely counter-cultural to everyone around you. Why? Because we have all, as a society, bought into a false bill of goods. We have come to rely on the noise around us to tell us what is important...who to follow, what to think, who to believe, how to feel.

And more often than not, we are encouraged to feel anger or discontent when we are uncomfortable; we are encouraged to feel not good enough by a society that wants us to consume more; we believe sound bites over real conversations with real people; we strive for air brushed images of perfection instead loving ourselves just as we are.

And the worst part of it is...we believe these narratives are the essentials. Our lives have gotten so cluttered and weighed down that we can't see a way out because this has become our identity.

I like to think that Jesus was recognizing some of this same clutter in the community he was talking to in our Gospel reading. If you have been paying attention, this is the 4th Sunday in a row that we have read about this thing called "the bread of life."

3 weeks ago we find Jesus feeding 5,000 people. Tangibly showing them what is possible through him. He's giving them the most essential thing he could give them. Real bread.

2 weeks ago, the people he fed weren't satisfied and wanted more. Jesus tried to explain things in another way and tells them to not look to the food that perishes (all of those non-essential things in the world) but to look to the food that endures (essential food that will truly take care of you).

Well, that explanation didn't work either. And so last week as the people continue to grumble, they still weren't satisfied. Jesus comes right out and says...it's me! I'm the one who won't perish. I am the bread of life. I am what is essential. Don't you get it? Well, they didn't.

And this week we find the people still complaining. So Jesus gets right up in their face and uses a little shock value... "Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you."

"Eat my flesh. Drink my blood." If that isn't a sound bite for you, I don't know what is.

It's a perfect headline for our short attention spans. It would surely up the ratings at CNN or Fox News.

But the people are so caught in the trappings of what they have been taught, what political side they are on, what cultural norms they have hung their hat on, what opinions they have built their identity around that they can't sort out what they really need. I'm not sure they even know. They can't grasp the essential thing right in front of them because they are so weighed down by the non-essentials that they have allowed themselves to be fed over and over again.

I love how persistent Jesus is throughout the Gospel of John. What Jesus is doing is systematically breaking down that non-essential narrative, moving us closer and closer to clearly understanding what is truly important. Jesus says the only thing you need to focus on is me. My body, my blood, right here in this moment.

Our call to his body and blood is our full attention on the one essential thing that will nourish us. And it's so very simple and straightforward.

Rev. Bertie Pearson, Rector of St. Albans Church in Washington, DC, describes this simplicity in Jesus as the things we value like being loved, friendship, peace, joy, beauty, truth, justice, and goodness. The essential things that bring us into the presence of God. Essential things that remind us how much we are loved and of seeing the infinite beauty in the world we are given.

Pearson says, “We chase after perfect beauty in something we can buy, we seek perfect peace in the ultimate vacation, the idyllic home life, but we end up with missed connections and broken HVAC systems, and we never get to perfection.”¹

You might say, this is the disappointing outcome of living for non-essentials. We never get what we have been promised.

But here is the good news...we can make a new choice, a choice of what feeds us, a choice of what we focus our time and attention on, a choice of what we put into our minds and bodies and souls. Jesus has made the choice clear. It’s our responsibility to set aside all that is non-essential so that we can live into what is truly essential.

Amen.

¹ <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/sermon/eternal-life-pentecost-13-b-august-18-2024/>