

ADVENT LUTHERAN WYCKOFF

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost • August 12, 2018

1 Kings 19:4-8 • Psalm 34:1-8 • Ephesians 4:25-5:2 • John 6:35, 41-51

After Jesus performs a miracle in John's gospel, he often holds a little seminar to talk about what just happened. Case in point is this week's gospel reading, which is a conversation about a conversation about a miracle we heard a couple weeks ago, the feeding of the five thousand. We often imagine these teaching scenes as Jesus lecturing about whatever topics he finds interesting while the disciples loll around on the grass, a bucolic scene out of the admissions brochure for a liberal arts college. And yet, it seems like Jesus actually spent a lot of his classroom time arguing.

When Jesus tries to explain what the feeding of the five thousand means in today's gospel reading, he calls himself "the bread of life which is sent down from heaven." And the crowd isn't crazy about that explanation. "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know?" they ask. Which is basically another way of saying, "You didn't come down from heaven. You came down from your mom and dad."

Now our reaction is probably to try to come up with a succinct comeback. A great answer about how Jesus is, in fact, divine and human. How Jesus did, in fact, come down from heaven and from his mom and dad. But if we get defensive and try to craft a perfect answer, we can miss what makes the crowd's skepticism so interesting. Because the way that crowd thinks about the relationship between divine and human feels familiar to many of us. We kind of know what they're getting at. We want to separate the divine from the human. We want to separate the Christ-like from the carnal. We want to separate the holy from the fleshy.

Think about the way we normally talk about holiness. We had a wedding here last summer, and as we were kind of milling around the back, this boy, maybe five years old, went up to the font and he dipped his hand in it and splashed some water around the basin. And his mom grabbed the arm of his sleeve, pulled him away, and told him in no uncertain terms that he wasn't allowed to touch the water. And the kid asked what all kids ask, "Why?" And she replied, "We don't touch the water because it's holy."

That's the way we usually think about holiness. Holiness is about being set apart. When someone says that the sanctuary of a church feels holy to them, what they usually mean is that it feels like an escape from the busy world outside. When we say a piece of music is holy, we mean that it seems to transcend our everyday experience of life. When we say that a person is holy, we mean that they seem unaffected by the anxieties of life, as if they're walking six inches off the ground.

Last week, I came across a lecture by Rowan Williams, who was the Archbishop of Canterbury about ten years ago.¹ It was a talk he gave to a group of young adults trying to figure out what they wanted to do with their lives. And the topic he chose was holiness, which doesn't really seem like practical advice. He starts out by asking, *Where do you find holy*

¹ "Archbishop Reflects on Holiness with Young Adults in Christchurch," accessed August 9, 2018, <http://rowanwilliams.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/2689/archbishop-reflects-on-holiness-with-young-adults-in-christchurch>.

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people? And the answer is that you usually don't find them apart from the world or off on their own in a cave in the desert or floating six inches off the ground. You often find them at the heart of very difficult situations. They're the people who go to the kinds of places Jesus went. They serve others in the shadow of the cross, bring light to the places that seem darkest, and proclaim hope in the places that seem hopeless. They bring humanity to the places where it's hardest to be human. Holiness doesn't come from outside the world, it emerges from within it. That's a good answer, and, it's worth noting, it's also a very Lutheran answer, not that the two are mutually exclusive.

The second question Williams asks is more interesting. *What is the experience of encountering holiness like? How do you know if you've met someone holy?* And his answer isn't that they overwhelm you with all the good they do. (They seem rather unimpressed by their own deeds.) And it isn't that they try to get you to become more like them. (They aren't gurus who want to sell you their system.) It's that they help you see God at work in the world in places you hadn't seen before. They make you fall more deeply in love with the world and, at the same time, more deeply in love with God. So you never leave an encounter with holiness feeling inadequate or worse about yourself. In fact, it's the exact opposite. You come to love yourself more because you trust that God's light can shine through you in spite of your shortcomings. So holy people have a way of, in Williams's words, "enlarging the world."

Now that's not a distinctively Lutheran answer, not everything has to be, but that image of "enlarging the world" is one that St. John certainly would have appreciated. Because that's exactly what John's Jesus talks about when he says that "whoever eats of this bread will live forever." Now, let's just pause for a second there. Is that true? Will everyone who is in relationship with Jesus live forever? Does being in relationship with Jesus prevent you from dying? The obvious answer to that is no. Or at least not quite. So how is what John says true?

Well, when John talks about eternal life, he's not just talking about time. When we hear eternal life, we often think *Well, it's like life and then it just keeps going and it just goes on forever and ever. You just kind of select the parts of your life you like the best and then copy and paste it forever.* But when John talks about eternal life, he's not just talking about time. He's talking about value. So there's a whole other dimension to what he's talking about. You don't just measure life in terms of years, you measure it in terms of depth. Eternal life isn't just life that's long, but life that is impossibly full and rich. Life lived the way God intends. With trust in God and love toward others.

Now, it's worth pointing out that eternal life isn't about stuff. It isn't about God rewarding people for their devotion. If you think Jesus ascended into heaven to help you climb the social ladder, you're going to be disappointed. Because eternal life is not about living with more. It's about living deeper. Living more deeply present in God's goodness and mercy and forgiveness and justice.

So we've been developing these two big ideas. One the one hand, we have holiness, which the crowd is preoccupied with. And one the other hand, we have eternal life, which Jesus is trying to talk about. And they seem unrelated. And then at the very end of today's gospel reading, Jesus takes those two themes and smashes them together in one little

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sentence. “Whoever eats this bread will live forever,” Jesus says, “And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”

So the way that Jesus gives us eternal life, the way Jesus gives us hope and freedom and compassion, the way Jesus gives us life that is impossibly deep, is with his flesh. And when Jesus says “flesh,” he means flesh. In the Greek, it’s *sarx*. And *sarx* is not about the body as a metaphor. This is not how the church is like the body of Christ. That’s *soma*. *Sarx* means muscles, bones, tendons, blood. This is not some detached Jesus who floats above our world without touching it. It’s God among us, alongside us, on the way with us. Flesh and blood and all. That fleshiness is what brings us into eternal life.

And that’s why those two seemingly unrelated ideas actually go together. Because the eternal life Jesus talks about is kind of like that feeling you have after you encounter a holy person, those people who have a way of “enlarging the world.” Eternal life is the recognition that the world is full of possibility and change and redemption and you see how despite all the baggage we all carry around, we too can also be a bastion of God’s holiness in the world. That we can enlarge the world for others just as Jesus has enlarged it for us. Because it’s only an encounter with the holy that can bring us into that eternal life.

So where should you look if you want to encounter holiness? Don’t lock yourself in a cathedral waiting for a sign from on high. Follow the body of Christ from this table out the doors and into the streets. And go to the places where the body of Christ is giving itself away. Giving itself away so that the world might be enlarged. So that the life might be made eternal. So that all things might be made new.

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