

**14 Pentecost  
August 26, 2018**

**In the name of the God of all Creation;  
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus;  
And the power of God known in the Spirit.  
Amen.**

As most of you probably know Caren and I just returned from three weeks in England and Scotland. It was a fantastic trip ... three days in London, a couple of days in York, then a 10-day tour of Scotland, and a final week in Edinburgh.

The time in Edinburgh was special because it was during the Edinburgh Fringe Festival ... a month-long extravaganza of performing arts and exhibits. It is the largest arts festival of its kind in the world with over 2,000 performances a day in more than 300 venues ... for almost the entire month of August. The audience for this year's Fringe is estimated to be over 2.5 million over the span of four weeks. Yes, it was very crowded ... but what a wonderful and fun crowd.

I'm not going to give you a travel-log of our trip, but for the purpose of this sermon I do want to mention our experience at two performances we attended during our time in Edinburgh. One was a play, the other a musical. One was acted superbly; the other was like a middle-school production. In the first play the actor didn't just act the emotions required in the role ... he lived those emotions. He didn't just act angry ... he exuded anger. He didn't just act arrogant ... he oozed arrogance. On the other hand, in the other play ... the musical ... the actors merely recited lines ... and sometimes forgot them ... and their acting was only an attempt at expressing the feelings they were meant to have. It felt very amateurish.

Another difference between the two performances was the way the stories were told. In the first play ... basically three short acts ... the audience was drawn into the story by drama and curiosity and emotion. On the other hand, the musical was written like one was reading from a diary ... this happened, then this happened, then this happened, et cetera. The first play kept the audience in a constant state of anticipation. The musical ... in spite of great singing ... was simply boring.

So, why do I tell you all this when I could be talking about the Scottish Highlands, or the castles we visited, or the 6,000-year-old burial cairns ... piles of stones some thirty feet in diameter and six to eight feet tall with an entrance shaft that line up precisely with the light of dawn on the winter's solstice? So, why these two plays without even any content to them?

Because I think the contrast of these two productions is related to our lessons this morning, especially in John's gospel. What the author of John's gospel was telling his readers is that you can't really understand Jesus unless you are willing to embody what Jesus embodied. This faith of ours ... if it is to truly lead us to fullness of life ... isn't about merely acting. It isn't about reciting lines and just following a script ... or reciting a creed. This is a new way of living, and it

is not something you can just imitate ... it is something that you have to live fully in your whole being. It isn't about acknowledging that Jesus was a good person, or the Son of God, or that Jesus Christ is the savior of the world. Agreeing to something is one thing ... living its truth is something else.

One thing to remember ... John's gospel was written in the last decade of the first century ... about 60 plus years after Jesus died. It was not written by one of Jesus' disciples, but maybe a scribe of one of Jesus' disciples recording what he heard in sermons about Jesus. This author of John's gospel had a copy of Matthew, Mark, and Luke ... plus other writing about Jesus as well ... to pull from as he wrote this treatise.

Now imagine an event that took place 60 years ago ... say Martin Luther King, Jr. and the civil rights protests. There have been a number of books written about that period of time ... Taylor Branch's series is a good example. His series of books is basically a timeline of events strung together to tell us the history of the movement. However, as the fiftieth anniversary of the passage of the Civil Rights Act came off the horizon there were a number of books that turned the historical timeline into something that had deeper meaning and was more personally engaging.

That is exactly what John's Gospel was about. Mark was the earliest gospel. Then came Matthew and Luke. They told the story of Jesus. The author of John's Gospel looked at them and said there is a deeper story, one that adds meaning and sacredness and mystery to the story. Instead of just giving people a model to follow, it gives people a way to engage the holy through the story of Jesus ... and enter into the story. That is what makes John's Gospel so different.

But let me back up for a moment ... our first lesson this morning ends the epic saga of David the shepherd boy who became king. His son Solomon has finally built a temple for the Ark of the Covenant ... the vessel that contains the Ten Commandments written on stone that Moses had received on the mountain. A month ago ... just before I left on vacation ... we heard about King David's exuberance when the Ark of the Covenant was brought to Jerusalem for the first time. The reading this morning happens a generation later when the Ark of the Covenant is finally placed in its permanent home in Solomon's new Temple.

It really takes a fuller explanation, but the Ark of the Covenant was not itself an object of worship. Rather it represented a relationship between God and God's people. One did not merely acknowledge God's law as being the "right" way to live ... one had to actually live the law.

Do you remember the disputes Jesus had with the Pharisees about healing on the Sabbath, or counting mustard seeds? These Pharisees were well intentioned, and they wanted to live God's law, but they missed the point. They thought that by strict adherence to the law as it was written would lead them into a full relationship with their God. Jesus kept confronting them with the pure intention of the law that was behind the specific commandment. If one ... like

Jesus ... sought a relationship with God by living fully into the intention of the law one would know the fullness of life. If one merely followed the letter of the law they would be in relationship with the Law ... not with God.

Anyhow, living the way of God is not easy. Intellectually acknowledging that the law of God is the right way to live is not all that hard ... whether it be the Jewish Torah, or the teachings of Jesus. We know what is right. However, you and I know, just like generations upon generations of our spiritual ancestors knew, that although we may have been well intended, our actions often come up short. As much as we want to live the way of God, and as much as we try to live the way of God, sometimes we fall short of the mark.

In our Gospel Reading this morning we heard the last of five-week series from John's Gospel about the bread and wine ... and the interpretation that this is the flesh and blood of Jesus. As I have said before, in spite of those who want to try to read this literally I believe this is a powerful metaphor. And this week we heard about the challenges to Jesus' teaching by some of those who were following him. "This teaching is difficult. Who can accept it?" they asked. Jesus said in response "The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life."

When I was growing up my parents took me to Sunday school in a number of different churches. What I remember is the many pictures of Jesus in the Sunday school classrooms ... Jesus the Good Shepherd ... Jesus with his arms open to little children ... Jesus with his hands sublimely folded as he prayed in Gethsemane. It was easy to believe that Jesus was, in the words of the children's song, "gentle Jesus, meek and mild." I think we easily sentimentalize such a Jesus, and the thought of following Jesus on a path through our life comes with little difficulty. Who wouldn't want to follow such a gentle, sweet soul?

However, if we look at the pictures of Jesus that come out of Central and South America and in other parts of the world that have known great suffering, we see a very different kind of Jesus ... a Jesus that is broken and bleeding, outstretched on the cross. These pictures, icons, and crucifixes can be difficult to look at for any length of time because they speak of pain, vulnerability, suffering, and death.

Following this Jesus is a much riskier proposition than following the Jesus of our childhood. It means walking a path where the vulnerable, the weak, and those in pain walk. Such a path may lead to death. Like the disciples we find this way of living the way of God to be difficult, and some of us hurry back to the Jesus of our Sunday school classrooms, where gentleness abides. And yet the invitation, the question that Jesus poses is, "Will you choose to embody the way of God, and not merely talk about it? Are you willing to give of your own body and blood for the life of others?"

I'm really not concerned with whether these words in John's Gospel were actually spoken by Jesus. I'm not concerned with whether that is true. I'm concerned about why it is true ... why it was true then, and why it is true today.

It's a radical posture that Jesus takes ... giving himself for others, many of whom will turn away from him before he is finished speaking. Yet this is the heart of who we have been told Jesus is over the last several weeks: one who gives himself as food and drink for all who are hungry and thirsty. We want to be careful that we do not simply spiritualize Jesus' claim. While it is true that Jesus feeds spiritual hunger and quenches spiritual thirst, here Jesus goes further. He will feed with his own body and blood the hungers and thirsts of poverty, oppression, and injustice. It is this claim, of giving himself for those who hunger and thirst, the poor of our cities and states and nation ... and countries around the world ... that makes the path such a dangerous one and leads finally to the cross.

Yes, this teaching may be difficult, but it is at this table ... this altar ... that we are fed. We can accept it to feed us spiritually. But with this powerful metaphor I think Jesus is saying much more than that. If we are to embodied Jesus so that he may live in us, and we may live in him, we have to be ready to accept that which is difficult ... including giving our lives for those who are oppressed and live in poverty and who suffer from injustice ... the same way that Jesus gave his life so that we might have life.

Solomon rejoiced when the Ark of the Covenant was placed in the Holy of Holies of the newly constructed Temple in Jerusalem. Solomon prayed with praises, and he petitioned God to keep the covenant that had been made with his father David. This is a God of relationship, who has given us this creation, who calls us to live in the ways of God, and who gave us Jesus to show us what a life in relationship with God might look like.

Two plays. Two ways of acting. We can recite words, or we can live the part. We can acknowledge the truth of God's law and recite the Church's creeds. Or, we can we can embody the God that is alive in us and fulfill that relationship with the holy that leads to fullness of life.

In John's Gospel I believe Jesus is telling us that when we live in full relationship with God ... as Jesus did ... we will know that fullness of life. As I said before, I am not concerned with whether the story is true. I am concerned with why it is true ... why it was true then ... and why it is true today.

Amen.