

Pentecost XIV

Joshua 23:1-2a, 14-18

Eph. 6:10-20

Jn 6 56-69

St. Mary the Virgin

August 26, 2018

The Rev. Dr. Paula D. Nesbitt

“It is the spirit that gives life....” Amen.

Some years ago a new bishop and his wife, whom I had known for years, invited me to visit them at their summer place. One evening after dinner, we began to discuss scripture. Having always thought him to be open-minded, I was surprised when, at one point, he picked up a Bible, stood up, and said in a raised voice, “If we start debating the meaning of what’s written, we might as well throw out the entire Bible.” He would later change his mind.

Jesus often encountered outrage from officials and others who expected literal devotion to the letter of the law. Since faithfulness to the Jewish law had bound together the Jewish people throughout their history of exile and diaspora, it formed a key aspect of Jewish identity; especially as a conquered people under the Roman Empire. Any relativizing the Law or intellectualizing it carried a risk to what gave Jewish communities their meaning and cohesion. Jesus’ teaching left many unable to move beyond the literal understanding of the Law, in this case the prohibition against consuming human flesh and blood.

“It is the spirit that gives life...,” Jesus emphasizes. Neither the letter of the Law nor any set of words are to be held onto literally if they violate the life-giving spirit. Throughout his ministry, Jesus continually encountered new situations that forced him to deepen and widen his understanding of Jewish law and to challenge the rigid ways in which it was being applied. His unfolding awareness that God’s purpose—and Jesus’ own mission—was not only among the Jewish people, but it was also to reconcile all humanity with God’s love and saving grace.

One truth I’ve learned over and over again is that words alone don’t change minds or hearts. Debating positions, viewpoints, or truth claims isn’t about who has the loudest voice or the most votes. We also find meaning in the context surrounding what is said, and through the relationships we hold. Over the years I was asked numerous times why I thought that I should be ordained, by those holding fixed beliefs against women’s ordination: a Roman Catholic priest, an African Anglican bishop, two Episcopal bishops, and several parishioners in my two seminary internships who had never experienced ordained women. Although a logical argument is important, as well as being able to make a point in a way that others understand, in every case a transition in belief came about through working together in ministry and letting God’s spirit and love work in our midst.

The new bishop who had been so concerned about literal meanings, not long after our dinner together he and his wife packed a trailer and began a several-month road trip through his new diocese, to get to know the people, their concerns, and the strength of their spirituality. Once he understood the context of the people and the diocese, he could let go of his own anxieties about becoming a new bishop that had pressed him toward literalism. He later would lead his diocese to change its thinking and its heart on the very issue that he and I had once disagreed.

Like many, I've been freshly touched by Senator John McCain's life and death. As two Episcopalians, he and I would have disagreed on many things had we ever had a discussion over supper, including perhaps how we understand scripture. Our differences of view might have been vast, but they would have been respectful. Discerning what he thought was right, he was not a political or party literalist, nor was he afraid of the political consequences of working with his rivals and occasionally supporting their position if he felt it was spiritually justified. As an illustration of this, he wished that two of his key rivals, former Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama, have the last word at his memorial service (at Washington's National Cathedral).¹ Their objective honesty was what he valued.

Literalism and transitions. Today's passage is a turning point in Jesus' ministry. He knows his time with the beloved community is coming to an end, and he needs to prepare his followers for the core transition that they would need to make. The flesh will die but the spiritual life will remain, nourished through the Eucharist.

Jesus also cautions them against putting him on a pedestal and worshipping him *instead* of God. He clearly states that he has no authority of his own apart from God; it is God that works in and through him.² It's tempting for anyone with a bit of power to make little gods of themselves, according to theologian H. Richard Niebuhr.³ Yet, our only real power resides in our awareness that it is God—not us—who can use it within us for good. When we use it for our own personal ends, we are likely to use it wrongly. An aspect of our tradition that I treasure is that it's not the individual priest who determines the validity of the sacraments; rather, it's God who works through the priest by virtue of ordination. This helps keep our faith focused on God and Christ, rather than dependent on personality traits.

Yet, our physical flesh and blood-- our material being—cannot be disregarded. They are how we learn about love, and about God's love for us. With our bodies we nurture, inspire, and sustain one another; stand for justice; and share God's grace and love in the world. As one scholar said, referring to the Christian community of Ephesians, we need "a community of love, to sustain us in life's challenges."⁴ In a community grounded in authentic love, we can become more or achieve greater things than what we do on our own; in community, we also become changed in the process.

Over the years, I slowly came to understand that part of the new bishop's concern with literalism that night had to do with his own thinking that was beginning to change. Going by the book had offered security even as he was exploring deeper meanings and understandings of God's Word. Once he and his diocese had formed a relationship where they could become a community of trust, their trust in his leadership in turn gave him the courage to lead with his heart.

The last time I saw him was at General Convention a few years ago. He was retiring, and had been invited to assist at the main Convention Eucharist. By coincidence I ended up at his communion station. When he handed me the body of Christ, I knew that this would be our last meeting, yet all that he had taught me and the priest who I am today had been shaped by the Holy Spirit acting in and through him,

¹ Stephen Collinson, "John McCain, senator and former presidential candidate, dies at 81," *CNN Politics*. August 25, 2018. <https://www.cnn.com/2018/08/25/politics/john-mccain-obituary/index.html>

² F.F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983, p.161.

³ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*. New York: Macmillan, 1962.

⁴ Bruce Epperly, "The Adventurous Lectionary—Pentecost 13—August 23, 2015.

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/livingholyadventure/2015/08/the-adventurous-lectionary-pentecost-13-august-23-2015/>

as it has through so many others whom I have known and called “friend.” They too, as Jesus Christ, will always be present for me in the Eucharist.

And now we come to another transition:

Lin and I came to St. Mary’s as a transition team, thanks to Interim Rector Don Brown. Today, we leave as a team. When we arrived, this community had journeyed over some difficult terrain. We have walked together for eighteen months, and our transitional part of the journey is complete. We all need new ways of hearing the stories of faith, with new or different voices sharing them, in order to experience God’s truth in fresh ways so that we might gain deeper insights and understandings. For you, and for us, It is time to continue growing.

We are not in the same place as where we began eighteen months ago. I certainly am not. I have learned and grown from our time together, and I leave spiritually nourished and strengthened, knowing that we will all be one in Christ’s love.

And now, my colleague and clergy teammate would like to share a few last words:

[Lin’s remarks]

In the words of Jesus Christ, “It is the spirit that gives life....” May the Spirit guide and keep you in beloved community, now and always. Amen.