

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost August 11 2024

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

Friends, this week, I went back to Charlotte, NC, where I was born and raised, for the funeral of the mother of a very good friend of mine. My "sister" Sarah.

While there I went and visited the church, I grew up in St. Mark's Lutheran in Charlotte. I'm thankful for the parish administrator Sue Wadgymer who let me in and gave me leave to wander around. Much has changed, but the basic layout has not. I saw grooves in the steps that I helped carve there. I saw the nursery where Sarah's mom Phyllis worked, and I played as an infant and toddler.

I sat in the darkened nave with the light shining through the stained glass and I gave thanks. Thanks to Mom and Dad for giving me the gift of faith and of being raised in that place. Thanks for Phyllis and all those other parents and adults who worked together to raise me in the faith. It wasn't just in the programs; it was in how they knew me. They kept up with my football games and that I was in theatre. They asked about what was going on in school and praised me when I used my gifts at church. I was part of that assembly of believers.

I cannot imagine what my life would be like without that. I am so thankful to them.

I've just finished reading Jonathan Haidt's book *Anxious Generation*. One I'm inviting you to read and we'll find a time and place to discuss this fall. In it he makes the case that smartphones and their replacement of a play-based childhood are not just correlated to but causes of the rise of mental illness in our children and youth. In one section *Spiritual Elevation and Degradation* he makes the case that "the phone-based life produces spiritual degradation not just in adolescents, but in all of us."

He wrote, as a sociologist who happens to be an atheist, about the imbedded need in us for those things that call us to live a life that is moving "upward". That pulls us closer to God, more into community and connection with the world around us. He writes about the need we have for shared sacredness. For embodying this sacredness. Kneeling, Standing, Moving, Receiving, Eating, Drinking. He writes about the need to be still physically, mentally, and to focus. How we need to transcend ourselves. Being slow to anger and quick to forgive. Finding awe in nature. All of which fill what philosopher Blaise Pascal called the "God shaped hole" in us.

I found that kind of life in my growing up years at St. Mark's. One that is informed and embodied by our readings this morning. There was a community at St. Mark's that regularly (every Sunday) physically gathered. That's how we got to know each other. We were together every week. Sharing our lives and participating in a ritual that indicated that what we were doing was not like the rest of our lives. And that ritual provided what Huston Smith called "spiritual technology" that lifted us up in the manner Haidt speaks of.

I knew in the organ music and choir, in the ritual language, in the sunlight colorfully streaming through the stained glass, in the shared action of rising and kneeling, in the rumble of the kneelers as they closed. I knew something different was happening here. Even when I was bored and counting the lights in the ceiling from my mother's lap. Something beyond the ordinary of life was happening here, because we didn't do this stuff somewhere else. It wasn't formal, it was ritual. Repeated actions that have meaning beyond just the actions. Ritual tells us this is important stuff. Foundational stuff.

I learned there about taking Sabbath and being still. Something God knows we need. We have talked about this life in the reign of God being something that we participate in announcing. That

faith is following Jesus. But it isn't just that. It isn't just about doing and for the doers.

Elijah was a doer. He responded to God's call in his life. We see him in our reading after he has confronted a powerful king and accused that king of sin. He has done battle with the worshippers of Baal and come out on top- he has been faithful. Yet, his life is threatened, and he runs away to the wilderness. He has been faithful, but now he is tired, worn out, ready to quit. I think we can relate.

What does God, what does Jesus have to say about that? Is this Christian faith all about do, do, do?

By no means!

Jesus as the Son of God knows the importance of taking time for rest. God finds it so important God places it in the top three commandments. To take at least one day's break from labor.

Jesus himself goes away to rest and re-create after his big ministry moments. The prelude to the feeding of the 4,000 in Mark is that Jesus tells the disciples who have returned from their joining Jesus in the mission of proclamation to come away and rest awhile.

And we look at the reading from 1 Kings. Elijah cries out to God, "Just kill me now!" God doesn't demand Elijah keep going. God responds to Elijah's need. Exhausted, Elijah falls asleep and wakes from a much-needed nap under the broom tree, to find God provides bread and water. Then he lays down for another nap. Once again Elijah wakes to find bread and water. Enough to sustain him for 40 days and 40 nights.

God knows that we need rest. In Matthew 11 Jesus says, "Come to me all who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." It is in Jesus that we find the green grass and still waters of restfulness. If rest is what you need today, you can find it here. Sitting, breathing, resting in the presence of Christ. There is even bread and drink. The bread of life that is Jesus. A bread that gives us strength for the journey. That does not just fill the belly and go away but sticks to our ribs. Sticks to our souls.

I found that Bread of Life at St. Mark's. In that pattern of weekly worship that just was a part of who we were as a family, which provided shape, comfort, a sense of something that could exist above our mundane (profane) existence. I found it in the word read and proclaimed and in the bread and wine I ate at the table with everyone else. And it stuck. It has yet to spoil. Even after a journey of more than 40 years.

I am so thankful to my parents and to that assembly of believers for that gift. One that has fueled my journey to this place and time but also one that brings me rest. One that offers you rest if you are tired. Come take a nap- during the sermon if nothing else. Come eat the Bread that is Christ come to you in scripture, in song, in communion. Come bathe again in the refreshing waters of baptism- that visible sign of God's claim on our lives that we can always dip into again.

Haidt doesn't speak of it this way, but it is here- in and through the good news of Jesus that we can, as Paul writes in Ephesians, put away the falsehood about how life should be. A falsehood perpetuated and filled by the algorithms of online and social media life, by the lure of wealth that appeals to our base instincts and turns us inward. One that says life is about you, your choice, your happiness, your good works, your success, your, your, your. But is really about their wealth, success, good. Your attention brings them wealth.

Here is the truth, Ephesians reminds us, we are members one of another. We are, all of us, connected one to another. So, let's live that way! Let's seek the good of our neighbor. Let's care for them. And in so doing... we care for ourselves. In so doing we will find life that truly is life. Life lived "above". Pulling us up and away from ourselves.

I pray that this assembly of believers that is St. John is a place that you can find rest, that you can the Word proclaimed, read, sung, and embodied in bread and wine. A Word that is the Bread of true Life. The Bread of Life that will stick with you not just for today, or tomorrow. But that it may give you strength for the journey of a lifetime.