Reflection for 8th and 15th August 2021—On the Way
Ephesians 4:25—5:2, 15-20 A "Way" to live;
John 6:35, 41–58 Jesus, Bread of Life

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It's good to be back with you after a month of staycation. Stephen and I did very few vacation-like things, but got lots of rest and caught up on some things that needed to be done. There is still much to be done at home, but there always will be.

Starting back in a short week, with the August holiday, was an easy way to re-enter the life of EPUC, but gave no running start on sermon prep for this week. So, I find myself musing on a Saturday about the texts for this week and the next several weeks.

For most of the month of August, the lectionary gospel readings are from the sixth chapter of John, this week and next talking about Jesus as the Bread of Life.

In the early years of Christianity, there was speculation in the culture around them that these followers of Jesus' "Way" might be cannibals. It's fairly obvious where such an idea would come from, with the words ascribed to Jesus at the institution of the meal we observe sacramentally as The Lord's Supper or Holy Communion: "Take, eat, this is my body."

That reference to the bread of communion as being Jesus' body, though not recorded in John's gospel account of the Last Supper,[i] would have resonated with the gospel writer John's referring to Jesus as the Bread of Life.

The Gospel of John introduces Jesus as the divine Logos, the word/wisdom that was with God and that *was* God from before the Creation. This Logos became flesh and dwelt among humans in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.[ii] The most significant thing about Jesus for John is that the divine Logos was present in him, and all of the marvelous things that he accomplished were by virtue of the power of God. In this way, John conceives the relationship between the divine and the human. Because God was present in Jesus, it is appropriate to refer to Jesus as the Son of God, which is an example of what can happen in the life of anyone else in whom the power of God dwells. In this connection, John says, "Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God." John's gospel has far fewer miracle stories than the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), which focus on the inbreaking Kin-dom of God. For John, they are signs of Jesus' divinity as the Logos (λόγος in Koine Greek).

John accomplishes this, in part, in his “I am” sayings that he attributes to Jesus. Remember that the gospel writer is not the disciple John. He was not an eyewitness. Rather, he is writing early theology at the end of the first century CE. The “I am” sayings implicitly refer back to Hebrew scripture where Moses asks at the burning bush by what name to address God. The answer: “I am who I am, I am who I will be.”

John then puts this name of God, “I am,” in the mouth of Jesus in eight sayings that usually accompany a miracle. He has Jesus saying “I am” the bread of life (6:35), the light of the world (8:12), the door (10:7), the good shepherd (10:11, 14), the resurrection and the life (11:25), the way, the truth, and the life (14:6) and the true vine (15:1).

Christians in the beginning were often referred to as followers of “The Way.” It may have been a self-selected descriptor. In the Book of Acts, Christianity is referred to as "The Way." The New International Version of the Bible records Paul's words in Acts 24:14 as "I admit that I worship the God of our ancestors as a follower of the Way, which they call a sect." I don’t recall ever hearing the connection, but it would make sense that they called themselves followers of the Way if Jesus indeed called himself the Way, as reported by John’s gospel. Or perhaps it is just a reference to following in the ways or path or footsteps of Jesus.

In the readings for 8th and 15th August, Jesus is quoted as saying “I am the bread of life.” A resource on the “I am” sayings produced by The Crossing, a church for Seekers in Costa Mesa, California, says this:

> The moment Jesus said “bread” his listeners would have been transported back thirteen hundred years into their national history. Each day, during a forty-year exile in the wilderness, God would provide bread from heaven to feed the Israelites. This heavenly bread was such a big deal that they made a point of celebrating it every year during the Passover meal. Jesus pointed out in John 6:26-27 that there are two kinds of food: food for the body, which is necessary but not the most important, and food for the inner [person], the spirit, which is essential.
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> Neither manna on the journey to the Promised Land in Moses’ time (Exodus 16:13- 18) nor loaves in the Promised Land in Jesus’ time (John 6:1-15) could satisfy the core hunger which Jesus came to satisfy. What the people needed was not food but life, and life is a gift. Jesus’ contrast was that food only sustains life, but Jesus gives eternal life.
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> Today, more than two thousand years after these words, we’re still starving. There is a hunger that lies within each of us and if we are not careful, we will look to be filled by something that could never satisfy. As with all hunger, what is

quickest and easiest, may not be what is best. C.S. Lewis, in his book *The Weight of Glory* said, “We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us.” These three may not be what you pursue, but a short reflection on what you are most passionate about most likely will.

Jesus’ bold declaration “I am the bread of life” connects the miracle of the loaves and the fish, to the significance of his life purpose. Jesus is the “bread of life” as he nourishes people spiritually and satisfies the deep spiritual longings of their soul. In that sense, those who trust in him shall not hunger; their spiritual longing to know God will be satisfied.[iii]

John’s gospel is the more theological, spiritually focussed of all the gospels. As we read it, we will want to balance it with the approach of the other three gospels, which focus on Jesus’ invitation to live in God’s Kin-dom Way. Now. To LIVE the Gospel’s good news that God loves everyone.

Former United Church Moderator Dr. Robert McClure once said, referencing Gandhi, “To a hungry man [or person], God will appear in the form of a loaf of bread.” A medical doctor who had been a missionary, McClure was The United Church of Canada’s first lay Moderator and refused to be drawn into theological discussions, because theology was not his area of expertise. In an interview in Maclean’s magazine (December 1, 1968), he agreed with the interviewer’s comment that modern missionaries practice more than they preach. McClure responded, “We follow Gandhi’s idea: that to a hungry man, God will appear in the form of a loaf of bread, to a drought-stricken farmer in the form of a tube well, to the mother and father of a little boy who is crippled, God will appear in the form of an orthopedic department with a rehabilitation centre. We have a motor mechanic from Saskatchewan. We sent him to Katmandu and Nepal and he keeps 40 vehicles there in order because he's a good motor mechanic. This is important.” He went on to say that the missionaries supported and encouraged the local evangelists in the indigenous churches as spiritual leaders of their people.[iv]

"You and I live in a hungry world," Dr. McClure said. “Sixty-six per cent of the world are going to bed hungry tonight. Fifty per cent are going to go from the day they were born to the day they die without ever having known a full stomach once.”[v] And THAT was in 1968!

Our second readings for these weeks, from the letter to the Ephesians, offers advice on how to deal with life’s incredibly hard times, like during a pandemic or when your town is destroyed by fire or at the death of loved ones or receiving a diagnosis we never wanted to hear. Avoid bitterness, practise gratitude, even when it’s hard to do, and love God by loving one another. Build bridges rather than burn them. Have the

courage to live in love, even when it seems to make no sense. Be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God at all times. These instructions in Paul's letter to Christians in Ephesus offered them encouragement to live in Christ's "Way."

Rev. Molly Bolton, a United Church of Christ minister, suggests in "Liturgy that Matters," a weekly resource to which I subscribe, that what links these texts are action and consequences. They ask for our attention to choices and their impacts on ourselves, one another, and the kin-dom we hope to be part of bringing about. There are so many ways to respond with self-accountability to the mistakes we make, the regrets we have, and the futures we bring about or the futures that we keep from happening, either deliberately or through not happening. Even as we choose to show up with personal responsibility, actively practicing the invitation to become "imitators of God," we are provided with what we need to live from our deepest places within. Through the "bread of life" we are nourished and sustained.[vi] May it be so.

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[i] John's gospel account of the last supper Jesus shared with his disciples was not a Passover meal. John recorded no words of institution for what we observe as communion. Instead, his Last Supper begins with Jesus' servant leadership in washing his disciples' feet and then the dinner conversation is recorded as a farewell discourse or sermon of final thoughts Jesus had for his friends and a prayer committing them to God.

[ii] https://www.cliffsnotes.com/literature/n/new-testament-of-the-bible/summary-and-analysis/the-gospel-of-john, accessed on 7 Aug 2021.

[iii] https://thecrossing.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Come-See_Book_Week-8-I-AM.pdf, accessed on 7 Aug 2021.

[iv] https://archive.macleans.ca/article/1968/12/1/dr-robert-mcclure#:~:text=We%20follow%20Gandhi's%20idea%3A%20that,department%20with%20a%20rehabilitation%20centre, accessed on 7 Aug 2021.

[v] https://thecatholicnewsarchive.org/?a=d&d=CTR19690117-01.2.64&e=-------en-20--1--txt-txIN-------- accessed on 7 Aug 2021.

[vi] "Liturgy that Matters" by subscription, distributed weekly by email from enfleshed.com.