

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend Courtney Veazey
Sunday, October 9, 2022

John 6:56-60, 66-69

Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which the ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever.” He said these things while he was teaching in a synagogue at Capernaum. When many of his disciples heard it, they said, “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?”

Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. So Jesus asked the twelve, “Do you also wish to go away?” Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.”

Holy wisdom, holy word.

Thanks be to God.

The sounds of service echo throughout the community of Idlewild.

Voices warming up to sing God’s praises.

Children laughing as they play and learn from faithful volunteers.

Pickle balls thwacking as people move their bodies in our gym.

Communion glasses clinking as elders gather our juice-stained cups.

Questions rumbling as we wrestle with our spiritual journeys and wonder where God is leading us.

The carillon ringing and calling every seeking soul to the Bath and Table...to prayer and the Word.

We are indeed a people – a body of Christ – who know how to serve in sincerity and in faithfulness.

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Following the movements of our ancestors, we continue Idlewild's legacy of service.

We serve meals every Thursday evening. We provide a mobile food bank. We offer shelter through Room in the Inn. We host a midtown legal clinic and offer our presence to those moving through the Mental Health Court. We plant gardens, and we welcome immigrants.

But, sometimes, in the midst of our doing, we lose sense of our being.

Sometimes – in the chaotic cacophony of our faithful and sincere service – we lose sense of our why – we lose sense of our motivation, our driving force, our inspiration, our reason for choosing to serve.

So, what inspires us to engage our ministries of witness? What drives us to embody our faith in such a way that through service we offer new life to others?

Why do we partake in Christ's mission in the world?

Why do we serve in this place during this time? Especially during this time of our continual emergence from the pandemic's trauma and of our continual reckoning with ambiguous losses – losses that leave us with feelings of disconnection from one another and from the church.

Ron Eyerman is a professor of sociology at Yale University whose writings explore “the notion of ‘cultural trauma.’”¹

Cultural trauma “is at work when a community experiences the dissolution of ‘collective identity.’”

¹ *Connections*, Year B, Volume 3, p. 247

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When a community experiences the dissolution of collective identity.

He described this concept of cultural trauma in an article from 2013, and encountering this definition in 2022, I find his words to be prophetic.

For they speak to where we are today – re-engaging and re-integrating after the disconnection and dissolution that has occurred over the last few years.

And we are not alone in this work of re-membering, of putting back together our collective identity.

The people that Joshua gathered and summoned to Shechem also experienced a dissolution and re-integration of their collective identity.

Taken from beyond the River,

brought up from the land of Egypt and out from slavery's bondage,

and safely led through the wilderness to enter a new land,

God's people needed a renewal – a reminder – a recalling of their collective identity.

A few things need to be noted about Shechem – this gathering place nestled in a valley between mountains known for their blessings and curses.

Shechem is the city Abram first encountered after God called him to leave his country and go to the land that will be shown to him.

It is the city where Jacob safely camped after wrestling with the Divine, receiving a new name, and reconciling with his brother.

It is also the city whose name appears as a noun throughout our sacred text to describe the various parts of our bodies that carry heavy loads and burdens.

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It is in this liminal place – this place of both history and beginnings – that Joshua reminds the gathered people of the choice they have in this familiar yet new land.

Our bodies may be weary from carrying heavy burdens but choose this day whom we will serve.

This choice – this moment of decision – is crucial. For this choice re-establishes their collective identity of being a people who serve the Lord, their God.

Their God who was with them throughout their dissolution and re-integration. Their God who pulled them across the River. Their God who saved them from the land of Egypt and the house of slavery. Their God who did great signs in their sight and protected them along all the way they went.

This is the God whom they – and we – choose to serve.

The opportunity to choose this commitment to being God's servants also appears in today's Gospel reading.

Eat my flesh and drink my blood, Jesus says. Then, you will abide in me, and I will abide in you.

Jesus invites us to an incarnational faith – a faith that eternally enlivens us through Christ's power abiding in us.

Jesus calls us to live at the intersection between the human and the divine. The intersection where through Christ, we become fully human – fully present – fully aware of our collective identity as servants of the Servant.

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Brought from beyond the River like our ancestors, Christ nourishes us with a feast of flesh and blood, so we may live lives of flesh and blood. Lives that join our triune God's movement by faithfully responding "to God's activity in the world through service to others."²

As many disciples in John's Gospel remind us, "This teaching is difficult. Who can accept it?"

Our sincere and faithful response of service to God and service to others is a risky and difficult commitment.

Our service is difficult because as Henri Nouwen writes in *The Wounded Healer*, "none of us can help anyone without becoming involved, without entering our whole person into the painful situation, without taking the risk of becoming hurt, wounded, or even destroyed in the process."

Our commitment to being servants requires our willingness to become involved, to offer our whole soul to the situation before us, to risk everything for love trusting that our hurts and wounds will not have the last word.

No wonder our commitment to serving God and serving others requires a daily choice.

Choose this day whom we will serve. Choose this day to whom we will go.

Will we choose to turn back from Christ and walk away from our collective identity?

Or will we choose to turn toward Christ – to believe and know that we serve the Holy

One of God...that we serve the One whose words contain eternal life...that we serve the

One who abides with us and birthes new life in the darkest of places.

² G-1.0304

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As servants of the Servant, may we daily choose to serve in response to our saving God.

May we choose to re-member our collective identity as we re-gather and re-integrate our scattered pieces.

May we choose to join the inbreaking of God's kingdom as we express a flesh and blood faith and dance between the human and the divine.

May we choose to say we will serve the Lord, for the Lord is our God.

And, as our various souls in this time and in this place choose yet again to serve, may our collective identity in Christ unite us in our service of God, of Memphis, and of the world.