

Stand By Me

This morning's message is the last in a series of five sermons on the Bread of Life Discourse found in the sixth chapter of the gospel according to John.

Some of you will, no doubt, be heaving a huge sigh of relief.

Others of you will be thinking, "Oh, no, I love the symbolism, the mystery, and the complex language and concepts found in John's gospel".

Some of you will be saying, "I don't want anyone to even try to unpack its meaning or relevance of John's gospel. I just want to revel in the hearing of the words. I just want to savour the invitation to abide in God's love through my Saviour, Jesus."

Indeed, there might even be some here lining up with those who are offended by this strange teaching from Jesus. His invitation to eat his flesh and drink his blood, and in so doing, being invited into eternal life, is not only too difficult to comprehend, for many of us, it might seem just plain impossible to accept!

Still others here will have trouble concentrating on the message at all.

This, because of the sad news of the sudden passing of our friend, colleague, and faithful servant, the Rev. Warren Bruleigh whose shared relationship of life in community here at Trinity United has come to its end.

Here's the thing though: Wherever you are on your life's journey, wherever you stand on the bridge of faith as it relates to Jesus, the Christ, God, and the Holy Spirit, the invitation here this morning is to be present to the Holy here now, this very moment.

The invitation is for you to engage in the spiritual practice of noticing or planning to notice where God has shown up or will show up in your life this week.

Last week, I had the privilege of taking part in the vacation bible school program offered just down the street at the Presbyterian church.

And, what a blessing it was for me to be among the twelve or so children, their minister, and almost as many volunteers!

One of the places I noticed God showing up for me was in the viewing of a short video clip the leader, the Rev.

Dr. Teresa Charlton had brought to share with us.

It was a very evocative piece of Elvis Presley singing “When the Storms of Life are Raging, Stand by Me”(1) accompanied by dramatic images of boats being tossed about like small boats on a vast ocean.

Our job as participants in the program was to take our parts in the back up chorus singing together in harmony, ‘stand by me’.

As you might imagine, this was not a small feat for us as a new community of friends and neighbours linked together by our common hunger for learning about all things biblical.

But, the good news for today is that we were able to do just that! And with only a few practice runs to boot!

Imagine my own surprise though at the lump rising in my throat and the tears welling up in my eyes as I tried to take in the scene of boats of all sizes being tossed about like tinker toys in the rough seas of everyday living and the blending of voices young and old in the background.

It was a God moment for me-a nanosecond of time where the bridge between heaven and earth was clearly illuminated and the linoleum under my feet felt like solid cobblestones linking the past, the present, and the future together.

To put it another way, I found myself unexpectedly immersed in a one

of those ‘thin’ places-where heaven and earth merge.(2)

Though this song was chosen by Teresa to bring life to the story of Jonah and the Whale for the children attending Vacation Bible School this week, it also fits with our passage from John’s gospel this morning.

As I continued to sit with this passage from John’s gospel, I came to realize this song could have also been Jesus’ theme so.

So perfectly does it undergird the whole of the Bread of Life Discourse and the clashing needs of the growing crowds demands and the resistance to Jesus’ strange and wonderful teachings.

From the miracle of the feeding of the 5000 on the mountaintop, to the disciples’ fears being quelled by Jesus’ comforting presence on the stormy Sea of Galilee, to the gnawing on Jesus’ difficult teachings in the synagogue in Capernaum, the song fits.

“When the Storms of Life are Raging” also fits well for those in our passage described as ones *offended* by Jesus’ invitation to abide in the most intimate of relationships with him and with God. Who here can’t recognize ourselves being pitched about by the rough seas of conflict and misunderstanding?

The strains of the song and the chorus fit too with the poignancy of the moment a some of the gathered ones

realize their own need to abandon the very mission Jesus calls them to embrace.

Finally, the echoing strains of the 'stand by me' fit beautifully with Jesus' own plaintive question to the remaining disciples: "Do you also wish to go away?"

And then in my own practice of lectio divina, (3) divine reading of the text, I hear a shift in the music as Peter responds with his most deeply fervent and passionate confession of faith:

"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."(4)

And, I hear echoes straining in the background as the music playing in my imagination ebbs and flows.

Suddenly I find myself humming Paul Simon and Art Garfunkel's "Bridge Over Troubled Waters"(5)

Once again, I see a bridge cleared illuminated and solid cobblestones under Jesus' feet, linking him as the Bread of Life come down from Heaven, offering his own flesh and blood binding us together to a living, loving, lonely God crying out for intimate connection.

Even in the midst of complaint and offense, abandonment, and fear of commitment to teachings too difficult to comprehend let alone accept, this is the good news for today:

"We are not alone, we live in God's world.

We believe in God: who has created and is creating, who has come in Jesus, the Word made flesh, to reconcile and make new, who works in us and others by the Spirit.

We trust in God.

We are called to be the Church: to celebrate God's presence, to live with respect in Creation, to love and serve others, to seek justice and resist evil, to proclaim Jesus, crucified and risen, our judge and our hope.

In life, in death, in life beyond death, God is with us.

We are not alone.

Thanks be to God."(6)

Jesus' self description as the Bread of Life is but one of his numbers ways he describes himself as related to God, humanity, and the cosmos. I, for one, am grateful for the opportunity to be nourished and sustained in this way in community this summer.

With thanks for the good news offered in our texts from scripture for our ongoing reflection this day. Amen.

(#) refers to the various sources supporting my reflection this week:

(1) Elvis Presley-“Stand by Me”-YouTube <https://m.youtube.com>

(2) Marcus Borg, The Heart of Christianity...

(3) Lectio Divina-Wikipedia <https://en.m.wikipedia.org>

(4) Harper Collins Study Bible, NEW STANDARD REVISED VERSION, The Gospel according to John, verses 68-69, p. 2026, Harper-Collins Publisher, 1989

(5) Simon & Garfunkel-Bridge Over Troubled Water-You Tube

(6) A New Creed, VU p. 918 The United Church of Canada, General Council 1968, alt., The Hymn and Worship Book of the United Church of Canada, THE UNITED CHURCH PUBLISHING HOUSE, 1996 Note: Some aspects of this morning’s reflection take their impetus from a variety of sources including:

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