

SUMMER

SERMON SERIES - 2021

August 8, 2021

Pentecost 11

John 6:35, 41-51

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I live on Treaty One Territory: the land of Anishinaabeg, Cree, Oji-Cree, Dakota, and Dene Peoples, and the homeland of the Métis Nation. I am grateful for the historic and ongoing stewardship of water, land, community and spirituality offered by Indigenous Elders and leaders. Many harms have happened and much healing needs to happen. The ongoing research and announcements regarding unmarked graves at former residential schools means that this is a particularly significant time of grieving, trauma, reckoning with history and soul-searching. On June 1, 2021, the ELCIC Bishops issued a letter entitled *A Renewed Call to Reconciliation*. I receive these words as wise counsel and a calling.

Acknowledging traditional territory is important to me. It is meaningful, prayerful and liturgical every time. It grounds me in my current place and context, keeps me mindful of how I got here, and amplifies my gratitude for the ones who helped me get here.

My name is Paul Gehrs and my pronouns are he/him.

I serve as Assistant to the Bishop for Justice and Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations with the ELCIC National Office. I am grateful for all the members of the ELCIC who help me live as a Christian, and I honour the gifts and witness you share with the world on a daily basis.

Jesus said "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

Then the people began to complain...

In this story, the people who *know Jesus best* fail to recognize Jesus as the bread of life. The ones who complain are neighbours and friends who knew his family, watched him grow up and lived in the same hometown.

It seems to me that today, the ones most likely to claim to know Jesus best are those most connected to the church. The power I see in this text is that it highlights any temptations I may have to underestimate the gift of the bread of life. God's love is constant, God's desire to feed the hungry is eternal, God's people are diverse and abundant.

The motivation for the complaining is open to interpretation.

Perhaps Jesus is too familiar.

I miss a lot when I do not pay attention to God's activity in the ordinary and the everyday.

Perhaps there is jealousy that someone else is getting ahead. A bitter of feeling of *What makes you better than me?*

A lot of damage has been done in the name of trying to prevent someone else from becoming the person God calls them to be. Not everything in life is a competition; especially in matters of spirituality.

Or perhaps it is fear. If Jesus is speaking truth, then I might have to change my ways. A new path can be scary; even one full of grace.

Partaking in the bread of life begets a journey of discipleship and transformation.

Perhaps complaining is a way of avoiding change or...truth.

As one response to the complaining, Jesus points to the Story of God providing mana in the wilderness. God's people were in the wilderness as part of a journey of liberation – from slavery to a new life in a promised land. In the daily collecting of mana, the community learned many lessons: lessons about utter reliance on God, the futility of hoarding, and the consequences of complaining. The journey to liberation is not always easy; but God is with us.

In the course of a lifetime, most people experience some time in a metaphorical wilderness. Every person has a life-story. Lessons about utter reliance on God are personal and sacred. It is a hard truth that some people have more and longer wilderness experiences than others do. It is also a hard truth that some people experience much more oppression than others do. The mana story reminds us that it is God's desire to liberate people and establish justice.

Seeking justice and reconciliation are essential elements in the life of every disciple. Personally, I describe this as *a calling to value persons, respect creation and build community by seeking peace, justice and dignity for all; and a calling to live with integrity, creativity, and a deep sense of the holy.*

In recent years, I have been growing more conscious of how much my own privilege influences how I perceive the world. The more I listen, the more I hear stories of how systemic racism and other forms of oppression continue to inflict harm in individuals, in communities, in societies and in the church. I feel a deeper calling to self-awareness and a desire to create safe spaces for listening. At the same time, I have a growing sense of my own need to be transformed by God in order for God's mission of liberation to be fully achieved. Regularly, Jesus and I have frank discussions about whether I am part of the problem or part of the solution.

Experiences that create meaningful transformation commonly include moments of discomfort, especially if I am hearing that my own actions have had a negative effect on other people. It requires commitment, hard work and prayer to be present and engaged in the midst of discomfort.

I remember the first time I took anti-racism training. It was required training because I was serving as an ecumenical partner on an Anglican Committee. I felt upset and indignant by one of the exercises. I began to complain. As we debriefed this in a small group, one person in my group, who is a black man and a priest, looked me in the eye and, with abundance of grace, asked me: "Paul, how often do you think about the colour of your skin?"

"Almost never," I had to admit.

He replied, "I think about it every day."

It was, for me, a transformative moment that marked the beginning of a long and ongoing journey. His words continue to sustain me in multiple ways.

In 2015, the ELCIC National Convention repudiated the Doctrine of Discovery. As a church, we confessed that this doctrine encourages patterns of domination and oppression that continue to afflict Indigenous peoples and the land today. And we committed to reflecting on history, seeking a deeper understanding of issues, upholding human rights and working for reconciliation.

On the last day of 2015 convention, I asked a youth delegate "what was a convention highlight for you?"

She said “the Resolution on the Doctrine of Discovery. We took that doctrine, and flushed it down the toilet!”

If only it were that easy. The journey for reconciliation and healing requires commitment, listening, hard work and prayer.

The work is both urgent and long term.

Jesus said “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”

Then the people began to complain...

But Jesus did not stop: he continued to feed, to heal, to teach and to love.

He continued all the way to the cross, where he himself said, *I am thirsty*.

And to the resurrection where he said:

Peace be with you.

Feed my sheep.

and Follow me.

We live with parallel realities:

On the one hand, God claims us, loves us, holds us and honours us for who we are. We never need to doubt this. We spend our lives learning the depths of this truth.

On the other hand, God desires a world without hunger and thirst. As long as there is hunger and thirst, there is more work to do. We spend our lives being transformed and working for transformation.

Radically loved and affirmed. Radically called to transformation.

Thanks be to God who gives us a faithful community, so we never journey alone.

Thanks be to God who gives us the bread of life in order to sustain us on journeys of discipleship, transformation and liberation.

Thank be to God who so loves the world.