

Sermon
August 15, 2021
Pentecost 12
John 6:1-58
St. Benedict's Episcopal Church, Los Osos

One of the marks of a Christian person is adherence to a certain set of beliefs. For Episcopalians and Lutherans, to take two, this means coinciding our belief with the historical creeds, the Apostles', the Nicene, the Athanasian. This type of faith is a matter of cognitive assent, if you understand what I'm saying. It goes into our brains and out of our brains. I remember my confirmation teacher one day giving us the assignment of writing down the words of the Apostle's Creed. This was easy, because I had internalized the words through weekly repetition. Writing them down on a piece of paper could be done without much thought. So really, the process by-passed my conscious brain altogether.

There is another kind of Christian life that is less belief or ascription and more experience. You may know what I'm talking about. This is what we tend to call that aspect of Christian life -- mysticism. Mysticism has more to do with the direct inculcation of faith than the indirect. The immediate rather than the inherited. Mysticism is the idea that our soul can communicate with God or sense ultimate realities. My confirmation instructors did not teach us about mysticism. Nor did my seminary professors, excepting a Jewish teacher, named Hayim Perelmuter. Nor did I teach it much when I became a pastor. Much more the shame.

Because I believe, or have faith, that most people have direct spiritual experiences that transcend understanding. Like the blessing, may the peace of God

which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. But the aren't generally talked about.

When Mary and I and our young kids Philip and Juliana moved into our new home in Oakland in 1997, our new neighbor was Evanell Ditlefson. She told us to remember her name, we could just say "heaven/hell" and drop off the h's. She had such a peaceful disposition. She was a regular churchgoer. But the reason for her inner peace was bigger than that. She recounted a time in her life when she was in the hospital – I think it was during an operation – that she died. She found herself hovering over the operating table, looking down at herself. You've perhaps heard other stories like this one, or might have had what is called a "near-death experience" yourself. Well, Evanel said that the result of this experience, in which she didn't continue in a dead state, but returned to her body, was that she found herself relieved of nearly all worry. She saw beyond the curtain of death, determined that death was not the end of things, but rather a transition of sorts. Thus her jolly, generous, blessed self.

Another story. We were having some trouble with one of our young Cairn terriers, Jack. He seemed peculiar, even thoughtful, different from his sporty brother Riley. We heard that a pastor friend of ours was training to be an animal communicator and healer, a whisperer if you'd like, and that she was looking for animals to "practice" on. This was during the shutdown. She lived in Napa while we, of course, were down here. We connected on zoom, and Jack was in the room with us. Julie, the name of our friend, didn't want to hear anything about Jack ahead of time, only a bit about the reason for our zoom and a photo. Then she turned off her

screen and sound, and, what, listened to and queried Jack, who lay still as a dormouse, for fifteen minutes. When Julie came back on, she told us many things about Jack. That he was definitely an observer, that he loved being part of his pack, and that he loved to show other people with dogs what a great pack we were, that this is as good as it gets! Julie also asked if we lived near the beach, because Jack loved those visits: the smells, the running, the water, the games, all of it. And he loved looking at the shiny things in the sky, which we interpreted as his fascination at birds. There was more, about how he liked to be petted. But don't you think this was amazing, that Julie could communicate with our dog Jack, across species AND across space? It is a mystery that is true. Like Evanel's experience, it is a window into something that we never learned in catechism. Or maybe in Episcopal catechism it's different!

With the sixth chapter of John, we are definitely into mystical territory. Especially as Jesus is trying to make the argument, falling mostly on closed ears, that He is the bread that came down from heaven. In his words, "I AM the living bread that came down from heaven." In the passages we've heard already and the one to come, the people who have been following after Jesus to this point, because of his wondrous healings and miracles, and now saying "Na Na Na, Na" and putting their fingers in his ears. Because his claims to be sent by God, to be bread that is eaten by others, to be one with God, are at the least unbelievable, and at the most, heretical and worthy of being stoned. Oh, and it wasn't in the first century catechism instruction either.

This is the also the first of many sayings by Jesus that start with I AM. Now we're in deep territory, because this was the name of God as revealed to Moses in the burning bush. The so-called tetragrammaton, or "four letters", which in Jewish practice is not even said out loud, but replaced by the word ADONAI, which means LORD. And so when those four letters occur in the Hebrew text of the Bible, they are translated as all-caps LORD in English. OK, strange. But also strange are the possible meanings of the four-letter word. Some say it means "I am who I am, or will be, or was" or "I have made all that is" or any number of variations. It is a name that leads us right into the hidden nature of existence and reality. That before anything we see or know or theorize was, there was this presence, this Godly presence, although even the word "God" can fall short. The gospel writer John uses the word "Logos", but that's another sermon. Suffice it to say that when John has Jesus saying "I am the living bread", he is intentionally referring to the ineffable name..

Further, Jesus, in calling himself the living bread that came down from heaven, is referring to manna, the mystical bread in the wilderness. It's funny, because in Hebrew, the word manna is a question, meaning, "What is it?" So Jesus could be saying, "I am the living what-is-it." (Could be a comedy routine. At communion, someone receives the bread, and asks "What is it?" And the server answers "Yes!") But Jesus could be saying, "You have questions? Come and follow me and we'll explore the answers together." As Hamlet says after seeing his father's ghost, "there are more things in heaven and Earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy." Mysticism is allowing one's whole person to expand.

But as you know, this mystical approach to life and belief has been largely sidelined in the modern Western intellectual tradition. Maybe because it can be misused or even used to manipulate others. Look at esoteric cults. Or maybe because it can cause doubt in inherited dogma. Or maybe it's just unsettling and causes distraction, and creates unruly masses.

But I'm saying to you today that a mystic approach is not for the few. It is a reality that many people experience, and others sense. CS Lewis, in his second book in the science fiction trilogy, *Perelandra*, tells of a revelation to the main character Ransom of creation as a giant tapestry, threads upon threads upon threads, continually crossing. And at each of those intersections, if I'm remembering rightly, is a glow. It's musical, it's lyrical, it's delightful, it's woven together.

Now you may be thinking what I'm going to say. Which is that the dogma of the church is originally based on the mystic, ecstatic and miraculous experiences of Jesus' first followers. The creeds didn't get invented out of someone's fervent brain. They were the result of the fire of the Holy Spirit, the excitement, yes, of the miracles, the compelling force of Jesus' teaching and the saving grace of God. And even more, when it comes right down to it, the way people LIVE their faith is through mystic means and thinking.

When the going gets tough, we pray. That's not just the brain. We believe that our prayers are not only heard by God, but also have their own effect. We profess belief in healing, in attendant angels, in the communion of saints, which is a vision that C.S. Lewis was probably drawing on. We believe that love will overcome hate, open hearts will prevail over shut ones, that new life is not only possible but

everlastingly present in the moment. Next time someone asks you to talk about your faith, don't settle for a dogmatic formula. Say, "How much time do you have?" The gospel is a long and ongoing story.

So my blessing to you is that, in your comings and goings, your routines and pauses, among your families and friends, that you would at times be reminded of how deep all this goes. That you would see and believe and tell, all the while holding onto Jesus' hand as tight as you can, and continuing to come to the meal that is a gateway to life.