

The Reverend Laura Palmer
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Abide in Me

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you
O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. AMEN

Oddly enough, it is the vaccine hesitant and deniers who have given me a new window into John's familiar text this morning. Today is the last of three Sundays in which the scripture text focuses Jesus as the bread of life. These texts are so familiar that it's easy to think we can't be surprised by anything we hear. But we can. I know I was.

Our reading this morning from Chapter 6 follows the feeding of the 5,000 - considered by some to be Jesus' first Eucharist—and Jesus walking across water and calming a stormy sea. Impressive miracles. But miracles aren't always enough.

Because after Jesus' teaching about eating his flesh and blood, some of his disciples turn away from him, despite the promise of eternal life. They've had enough and quit. Verse 66: "From that time many of his disciples went back and walked no more with him." How had he failed convince them? I wonder how Jesus felt? Doubtful? Discouraged?

The miracles weren't done to necessarily win converts, but it's striking that they failed to convince some of his disciples that he was worth following and they walked away from him.

The Covid vaccine is a miracle. A flat out miracle. And yet millions of Americans – who have no health issues and are eligible - refuse to take it. You've all heard the reasons why they're choosing death, possibly for themselves or for others, rather than life. No doubt you've seen the wrenching videos on TV of dying people urging others to do what they didn't do - get vaccinated.

A Catholic cardinal in Wisconsin who urged people not to get vaccinated is now on a ventilator. Cardinal Raymond Burke, had said in the past that the best weapon for fighting the virus is Jesus Christ, not the vaccine. Really?

That those with access to science and information who choose to mock a miracle like the vaccine is antithetical to everything Jesus lived for and died for. We are not our brothers' and sisters' keepers if our choices can kill them.

We are called to abide with Jesus, so his lifeblood and flesh becomes one with our being. But Jesus acknowledged this was a “hard teaching.”

It was hard for some disciples to believe that he was “the bread of heaven” – the divine son of God, who offered believers eternal life, unlike the manna from heaven that provided only bread for the Israelites journey to the promised land. The disciples knew Jesus was the son of Mary and Joseph. Now he claims he’s also the son of God? What they lacked was faith. The faith that Peter proclaims in a moment when he gets it exactly right: “We have come to know that you are the Holy One of God.”

And today we know God in the breaking of the bread and the drinking of the wine. Our faith, Peter’s faith, is all right there in the *mystery* of the Eucharist. Writes Episcopal priest and author, Barbara Brown Taylor:

What are we to believe? When Jesus invites us to his meal, is it an invitation to a picnic, a blood sacrifice, a last supper, a turn at God’s breast? We are not invited to understand, we are simply invited to be fed, holding out our hands to receive what has pleased God to put into them. Like holy manna, it is not the meal we had planned nor even the meal we would have thought to want, but it is the meal God has given us, the very bread of heaven.

And as Christ’s followers we return the gift by giving it away, even when it’s risky and hard. Consider the word, *abide*, a word with a serenity all its own. “Abide in me” suggests grace, patience and comfort.

But it’s not enough to abide in Jesus and stop there. We who abide in him are called to not only be sustained by the bread of life, but to reach out to others needing to be fed. And you can start right where you are.

Here is an exquisite story about how that can unfold.

Earlier this summer, I was asked to do an interment in our courtyard. All I had was a name of the woman whose sister-in-law would be buried there. I reached out to her and asked if there was anything I should know.

Yes, she said, a few details might be helpful.

“My brother and I have been estranged for 38 years,” she said. During the early months of the pandemic when friends of hers were dying, she decided it was “Time to make lemonade. I threw out all the bad lemons and kept whatever remained,” she said, “and sent my brother an email asking if we could be in touch. Every Sunday night, since March of 2020, we have talked for an hour on Zoom.”

Four months after they began talking, his wife died in her sleep beside him. He was unable to travel to her interment because of his health issues. His sister and I prayed. She placed her ashes in the ground. It was something she could do for her brother and the sister-in-law she’d never met.

Their estrangement was a familiar one. Drugs and alcohol set her brother on a tortured path as a teenager that drove him away from his family and his sister, for 38 years.

But she took a risk and reached out over the canyon of their estrangement, offering him, and also herself, the bread of life, the cup of salvation. This was not done because his sister was particularly religious - it’s deeper, and like the Eucharist, more mysterious than that as the holiest of holy things are.

She now lives in her late parents’ home, the home where she and her brother grew up in. She has said to her brother that if it’s ever too hard for him to live alone with his disabilities, he has a home with her.

Come, abide with me, she said, offering from her heart, the bread of life, the cup of salvation.

AMEN