

Proper 13B; August 4, 2024
Grace Episcopal Church, Keswick, Virginia
Marion E. Kanour

“Jesus said to them, ‘I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.’” ~an excerpt from John 6:24-35

This is the second Sunday we’ve heard from the sixth chapter of John’s gospel. Both readings have mentioned something about the bread of life. Last Sunday we had the feeding of the 5,000 and the implied association for Christians with Communion when Jesus blesses and breaks the bread. This Sunday some of the 5,000 follow Jesus across the sea for the wrong reason—to get more of that bread. Jesus tries to reframe the situation into a teaching moment. He tells them they’ll never hunger or thirst if they follow him.

John is the last gospel to be written—around 90-95 CE. The author is writing to Jews who have become Christ followers. These Jewish converts have left Judaism and are being criticized by other observant Jews for abandoning their religious tradition. John’s gospel offers the comparison between Judaism and Christianity, never more clearly expressed than in today’s reading: “Jesus said to them, ‘I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.’” John is talking to Jews about the reason to be a Christ-follower. He’s comparing the old covenant with the new; he’s trying to persuade Jews to leave a legalistic understanding of God’s relationship with God’s people. He’s calling them to follow what gives life now, if they’ll follow the teachings of Jesus. Love your neighbor as yourself and live fully now. Jesus’ life’s work isn’t to persuade us to follow him so we’ll live forever. He wants

us to follow him into a different way of living **now**. That's the point for Jesus: living now. Changing the world. Now.

All major world religions have something to say about eternal life—mostly that it'll be a good thing for the faithful and painful for non-believers and unrepentant sinners. It seems to be part of what it means to be human to wonder, and sometimes worry, about what's next. The *Epic of Gilgamesh* dates back at least to the 22nd century BCE. You may recall it's primarily the story of a man on a quest to become immortal. Shangri-La, Ponce de Leon's search for the Fountain of Youth, Peter Pan's hope never to grow old and the quest for the Holy Grail are all variations on that timeless theme. So, if all world religions make some sort of claim about eternal life, reincarnation being included in that broad term, then what shall we say to those using today's gospel reading to claim those souls who don't know Christ will be denied eternal life? Are the other world religions simply delusional or worse, intentionally misleading their believers? Or is it the other way around—do we misinterpret the teachings of Jesus when we use John's gospel to make a case for excluding all but believing Christ-followers from eternal life? Is that what Jesus really meant, do you suppose? I'm guessing he'd be appalled.

Growing up Baptist, as I did, I'm well-acquainted with the collection of verses aimed at proving only Christ-followers will get to heaven. "No one comes to the Father, but by me" and "Go ye therefore into all the world, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" were the most often cited. I recall one related discussion while a student at Yale Divinity School in a semester-long class on Eschatology—that "part of theology concerned with death, judgment, and the final destiny of the soul and of humankind" (Oxford Dictionary definition). I was making the

case for universal salvation—that is, that God cherishes the whole creation, not just those who believe “Jesus saves”—when suddenly a classmate jumped to his feet, Bible in hand, and began berating me for what he believed to be my heresy. Pounding his Bible, he screamed, “It says right here you’re going to hell if you don’t believe Jesus is your Lord and Savior. Jews and Muslims and Buddhists—they’re **all** going to hell. **You** wanna go there, too?” This outburst prompted our visiting professor, the 1986 Nobel Peace Prize winner, Elie Wiesel, to rise from his chair. He was rarely animated as a lecturer, but in this moment his face was alive with the pain and compassion. “Young man,” he said with measured gentleness, “God is in hell, too. I saw him there.” As you may know, Dr. Wiesel was a Holocaust survivor. He was imprisoned as a child in Auschwitz, Buna, Buchenwald and Gleiwitz. His mother and youngest sister died in Auschwitz; his father died in Buchenwald. It takes little imagination to understand his point to the Bible-pounding student. Wiesel’s God was murdered along with his faith in the German death camps. His God never rose again. Wiesel’s life was dedicated to remembering that personal, as well as public, holocaust that we might never forget the horror he and so many others knew. Though his experiences caused him to bury God in his pain, he still had hope love would prevail in our hearts and minds, though his personal despair remained unaltered.

What has your life experience taught you? Is it folly to hope the phoenix will rise from the ashes, foolish to insist on the hope of the present moment, naïve to believe the human spirit, created in the image and likeness of God, can continue to love even in the face of extreme evil? What do you think? What has your life taught you to this point?

Dr. Wiesel died in 2016. Seven years before his death, in his final visit to Germany, then President Obama and German Chancellor Angela Merkel joined Dr. Wiesel at Buchenwald. Obama paid tribute to his great uncle who participated in the liberating of a near-by camp and called all people to continue in the struggle to liberate the oppressed wherever they may be. Merkel spoke of the responsibility of governments to prevent the travesty of future Buchenwalds. But Wiesel could only give voice to the suffering of his father in that place. He found no hope for redemption...no bread of life...only manna in the wilderness.

The Buchenwald plaque they stood next as they spoke is a memorial to the survivors. It's kept at a controlled 37 degrees Celsius...the temperature of a living human body.

The point for us this morning is this: we are that living bread Jesus speaks of....or we can be, if we choose. Pain and suffering can be transformed beyond the Cross, beyond Buchenwald into a present that insists on hope and redemption. Can Jesus save? Surely he does, when we eat of this kind of living bread. We're invited to this kind of new life every time we celebrate Communion together...not to open the gates heaven upon our death...but to open hearts and minds to the presence of love here on earth. It's our calling as followers of Jesus. It is the substance of our baptismal vows. And yet, so often we're tempted to despair. May we say yes to love's hope as often as we're able, that because of us, our children's children might know love can prevail. We have no greater legacy than that. Christ has no body now but ours. We are the body of Christ whenever we choose love. May it be so in our hearts and in our world. Amen.

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