

**“Bread that Abides”**  
**A Sermon on 1st Kings 8:22-30 and John 6:56-69**  
**David B. Smith, Guest Preacher**  
 Conley Memorial Presbyterian Church (USA), Marion, NC  
 13th Sunday after Pentecost - Aug. 23rd, 2015

\*\* This sermon was prepared with emphasis on verbal presentation. Consequently, the following manuscript may stray from proper grammar and punctuation at different points.

This summer I had the privilege of serving as the Seminary Intern at The Center in Baltimore. The Center is a mission of the Baltimore Presbytery that partners with congregations of all denominations to engage in transformative ministry in the city and suburbs of Baltimore. We welcome groups of all ages and backgrounds to come and work alongside our congregations. During the first week of our summer programming, my group and I visited St. Matthews New Life United Methodist Church in East Baltimore. Our mission project was to canvas the neighborhood, handing out flyers and inviting folks to join us for an event called “Hotdog for a Handshake.” The gathering is held monthly and is staffed by an inspiring group of church members who out-walked and out-invited our entire group of young people. The purpose of the ministry is to provide free, quick and confidential HIV testing. Those who attend, get the added bonus gift of a free hotdog.

After we finished inviting folks and cleaning up the fellowship area in the basement, I asked one of the church leaders if we could use their sanctuary to host our daily devotional. He had been quiet for most of the day, but his presence irradiated leadership. I could tell he was hesitant at first, but he politely took down the velvet rope that had marked off the steps to the sanctuary – a literal “upper room,” I thought as I made my way to the top floor. The day before, nine members of Mother Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal had been shot in a racially motivated attack. St. Matthews New Life United Methodist Church is a small, African American congregation in a materially poor, inner-city area... Our group of visitors was from Fairmont Presbyterian Church in Cleveland, Ohio. Fairmont is a large, wealthy, white, suburban congregation. Yet, there we were.

We gathered together at the front of the church, sharing the ways we had seen God at work that day. We offered prayer and challenging ourselves to face the realities we were encountering in Baltimore city. We referenced the attack on Mother Emmanuel AME Church in Charleston and I challenged my group to make themselves aware of how amazing it was that we—a group of predominantly white people, could be welcomed so warmly into this house of worship... today of all days.

After we ended our time together, I went up to the gentlemen who had been observing our reflection from the back of the sanctuary and thanked him again for allowing us to use their space. He put his hand on my shoulder, and began to choke up. He said, *“It is God’s sanctuary...” everyone is welcome. The moment we forget that, is the moment we forget who we are.”*

In our first scripture reading this morning, we have come upon a recounting of King Solomon’s fervent prayer for God’s blessing upon the building of a new temple (an earthly dwelling place for God in Israel). The Israelites were not the only group of people in the ancient world who built an earthly dwelling place for God in their city. Building a

temple was a way of saying to the world and to one another that God was with the people in that place. It was a marker, not only of God's claim upon the lives of a people, but of God's salvific presence in their midst. To turn toward the temple, meant to turn toward God.

Solomon offers his prayer in a Spirit of true faith. He trusts in God's providential care for God's people throughout the generations. Despite all of the great king's earthly failures, he turns toward God. He brings God his entire life and the corporate life of his people. The King asks that God might hear the prayers of those who turn toward God's presence in the temple. He does this, not only for his own people, but for all the people of the world. He prays that even those who are considered foreigners -- those in the world who are labeled as outsiders, might be given a voice in God's dwelling place.

In this morning's reading from the Gospel of John, the lectionary has brought us to the conclusion of what scholars call the *Bread of Life Discourse*. Jesus, like Solomon, reminds his followers of God's faithfulness in the past by reinterpreting the story of God's provision of Manna in the wilderness centuries before. Jesus doesn't build a temple, but he does call his listeners to turn toward God by turning their hearts toward the revelation of God in himself. He calls his listeners to remember the times in the history of Israel and in their own lives where God's presence has sustained them through the wilderness-- *"Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me (John 6:56-57, NRSV)."*

We remember his words when we come to the Lord's table and consume the body and blood of Christ. As Presbyterians, we confess that when we partake in the bounty of this table, Christ is "really present" in, with and through the bread and the wine. For us, and in us, Jesus becomes *the bread that abides*, even as we become the people who abide in him.

Biblical scholar Lamar Williamson Jr. writes, *"To eat Jesus' flesh is to take his humanity into our own, identifying with him in lowly service at the cost of life itself."* To be Christian means to feast upon Jesus. It is to partake of *the bread that abides...* the bread that brings life eternal. It is to live in Christ, and to open ourselves to the abiding presence of Jesus in our own lives. Partaking of this heavenly bread that abides, means placing our hopes, dreams, doubts and disappointments in God's hands. It means following Jesus, even when he is traveling into uncomfortable places. It means standing alongside the stranger, as we look together toward the dwelling place of God. Feasting upon Jesus means accepting that God is *with us* in him, and striving to *abide in Jesus* means opening ourselves to God's transformative presence in our own lives.

Frederick Buechner writes, *"What does it mean to be 'with God?' It doesn't mean you have to be thinking about being with God, or feeling religious, or sitting in church, or saying your prayers, though it might mean any or all of these... [It means we trust that Jesus' words are the words of life.] We think of Eternal Life, if we think of it at all, as what happens when life ends. We would do better to think of it as what happens when life begins. In other words, to live Eternal Life in the full and final sense is to be with God as Christ is with him, and with each other as Christ is with us."*<sup>ii</sup>

Jared McCulloch was a senior in College, with plans of attending seminary after he graduated. His university was in the city, so most students didn't have cars on campus. Jared had a car because he drove to work in the suburbs on weekends.

Whenever one of his friends wanted to go out, he was always the first person they called. He never grumbled about it much. He was glad to help out, so long as it could fit into his schedule.

One morning, he took a friend to work. It was early. The sun was just coming up. Jared rounded a curve and suddenly realized that a pickup truck was over on his side of the road. He swerved, but it was too late. The two cars clipped one another and Jared's small sedan went spinning out of control. As the car spun, it was as if time came to a stop. He saw the bank and he knew he was going over. In that moment, he realized... "this is it. I'm going to die." Then a strange feeling came over him. He felt as if there were someone else in the car... someone sitting in the seat behind him. He knew no one was there. Yet, in a profound way, he also knew that he was not alone.

In that split second, that moment of eternity - living outside of time, Jared knew in his heart that he had caught a glimpse of Jesus. As soon as his mind could grasp the reality of his impending death, a profound peace also came over him. He knew that he was not alone. Psychologists call it the "third man effect." When our brains experience traumatic events, they generate the comforting presence of an "other." Electrical pathways are stimulated in such a way that we feel the presence of someone we trust, someone who "has our back."

Since, I'm telling you this story, you can probably guess that Jared didn't die. In fact, he climbed out of the car without a scratch. He wrote of his experience later, "I knew that God was present, not because I escaped with my life... there are people with much deeper faith than I who haven't made it. I knew God was present, because in Christ, God was with me in my moment of greatest need. When I had nowhere else to go, I found rest in the one who holds the words of eternal life."

What is the gift of eternal life, after which so many have sought throughout the ages? Is it a gift that is promised only to a chosen group of "insiders?" Is its only purpose to provide complacent Christians with a "get out of hell free card?" Or, is the gift of eternal life something more real, true and present. Is it something that has meaning for us in the highs and lows, in the green pastures and in the deserts of our lives?

In the face of Jesus' challenging teaching, many of his disciples parted ways with him. Revealing the fullness of his humanity, he asked the few who remained, "*do you also wish to go away (John 6:67, NRSV)?*" Read one way, their response is simple and matter-of-fact. "*Lord, to whom else can we go (John 6:68, NRSV)?*" --- We've come this far, we might as well see it through. Read another way, their response becomes one of the most profound and moving statements in John's entire gospel. "*Lord, to whom else can we go? You have the words of eternal life (John 6:68, NRSV).*"

Gerard Sloyan writes, "Believers are driven, so to say, into the arms of faith. Their acknowledgement of the truth of Jesus' words of eternal life is as much a matter of having no alternative as of positive reasons. *This is the great minimum of Christian faith. In times of intense trial it can be the great maximum.*"<sup>iii</sup>

*The promise of the Gospel is this: when we have nowhere else to go, Jesus has the words of eternal life.*

Abiding in Jesus may look differently for you than it does for other people. Perhaps, in this moment, abiding in Jesus means sharing a pew with someone who will vote differently than you in the upcoming election. Maybe abiding in Jesus means opening yourself to the possibility of reconnecting with that long-sibling that you haven't

spoken with in years. For your community of faith, it could be that abiding in Jesus and allowing Jesus to abide in this place, means looking out into the community and in our world and asking yourselves what “foreigners” are looking for a faith home.

Whatever the specifics, I pray that you will find the rest that comes from knowing; when you feel you have nowhere else to go, all you must do is turn toward God... the one who has made a dwelling in Jesus, the bread that abides. In the name of God, our Creator, redeemer and Sustainer. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Lamar Williamson Jr. *Preaching the Gospel of John: Proclaiming the Living Word* (Westminster John Knox Press; Louisville, KY), 84.

<sup>ii</sup> Frederick Buechner. *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (Harper & Row Publishers; New York, NY), 21-23.

<sup>iii</sup> Gerard Sloyan, *Interpretation: A Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, John* (Westminster John Knox Press; Louisville, KY), 76.