



BIBLE STUDIES THAT WORK

Pentecost 13, Proper 15 – Year B
August 19, 2018

[RCL]: 1 Kings 2:10-12; 3:3-14; Psalm 111; Ephesians 5:15-20; John 6:51-58

1 Kings 2:10-12; 3:3-14

“Ask what I should give you.” The Lord comes to Solomon in genie-like fashion soon after he has taken over David’s throne. I remember preparing myself for versions of this scenario as a kid: what if God (or someone else) came to me and told me I could have anything I wanted? What would I choose? There was a time when what I most wanted was a life-size talking family dollhouse; a few years later, I wanted a baby sister, then a dog. Solomon was more sophisticated than I was as a child; he asks God for an understanding mind. God is so pleased with Solomon’s request that God grants not only an understanding mind, but riches and honor to go with it. God is not likely to come to us in the middle of the night with an offer to grant wishes, but God’s invitation to Solomon is available to us, too: “Ask what I should give you.” We, like Solomon, can imagine our own hearts and minds transformed by the wisdom and grace of God.

- What would our lives look like if we earnestly asked that our hearts and minds would be transformed by the wisdom and grace of God? What would change?

Psalm 111

The final verse of Psalm 111 has always struck me: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; those who act accordingly have a good understanding.” Until now, the psalmist has focused wholly on singing God’s praises and marveling at God’s amazing works. At the very end, the psalmist turns his attention to the reader, offering the directive to “fear the Lord” in order to gain wisdom and understanding. It can be hard to connect to instructions like this; what does it really mean to “fear” God anyway? When some read “fear,” they hear awe and wonder, but for many, this language is confusing and distracting.

- What do you hear? How does your relationship with God bring wisdom and understanding into your life?

Ephesians 5:15-20

Jesus' followers were familiar with accusations of drunkenness and debauchery. On Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit filled the hearts and mouths of the multitudes so that everyone speaking different languages and dialects could understand one another, skeptical onlookers accused the disciples of being "filled with new wine." In this letter to the Ephesians, Saint Paul warns against excessive drinking, but he offers an exciting alternative: be filled with the Spirit, instead. Both passages suggest that to be filled with the Spirit of God can look as rowdy and slap-happy as being drunk. In our churches and faith lives today, it is hard to imagine an outsider confusing our worship with a lively bar scene, but we can seek ways to be filled with the joy of the Spirit that is invigorating and refreshing. Saint Paul identifies music and communal singing as a healthy way to express love and gratitude to God.

- What other ways can we fill ourselves with the Spirit? How do we experience the joy of Christ in our communities?

John 6:51-58

Some version of the term "eat my flesh" occurs half a dozen times in this short passage from the Gospel of John. This is one of those passages that makes me cringe, not because there is anything wrong with it—I believe whole-heartedly in the beauty and life-giving power of the Eucharist—but because it just doesn't make sense to non-Christians, or even to many Christians, for that matter. In a world where what it means to be a Christian seems increasingly fragile and complex, I find myself looking for ways to make Christianity more accessible to those who may struggle with how it is portrayed in the news or pop culture.

Well, the warning "unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you" is not very accessible. In fact, this is the kind of passage that caused skeptics to accuse the early church of cannibalism. But if we can get beyond the living-dead-like tone of this passage, we encounter something unique and challenging about Christian faith: following Jesus is meant to be a visceral, embodied experience. There is something vitally important about taking on the person of Christ physically, in our bodies, through the most simple, everyday practices of eating and drinking. This may not be the best Gospel reading for a newcomer, but the invitation to experience new life through the power of Christ's body and blood is something we can all chew on (*with apologies for the pun!*).

- How would you explain this Gospel text to a newcomer? Is there anything about it you find challenging?

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