



SERMONS THAT WORK

Pentecost 2 – Proper 4 Year B

Bread, Law, and Spirit

[RCL]: 1 Samuel 3:1-10 (11-20); Psalm 139:1-5, 12-17; 2 Corinthians 4:5-12, Mark 2:23-3:36

“During the bombing raids of World War II, thousands of children were orphaned and left to starve. The fortunate ones were rescued and placed in refugee camps where they received food and good care. But many of these children who had lost so much could not sleep at night. They feared waking up to find themselves once again homeless and without food. Nothing seemed to reassure them. Finally, someone hit upon the idea of giving each child a piece of bread to hold at bedtime. Holding their bread, these children could finally sleep in peace. All through the night, the bread reminded them, ‘Today I ate and I will eat again tomorrow.’”

Dennis, Matthew, and Sheila Fabricant Linn tell this story at the beginning of their book *Sleeping with Bread: Holding What Gives You Life* as an introduction to the Ignatian concept of the Spiritual Examen, specifically teaching how to discern spirits of consolation and desolation in one’s life in a fairly simple way. Each day, a person asks, “Which moment am I most grateful for today?” and, “Which moment am I least grateful for today?” If those initial questions are not enough, the Linns suggest other questions that get at the same concept, such as, “When did I give and receive the most love today?” “When did I give and receive the least love today?” or, “When did I feel most alive today?” “When did I most feel life draining out of me?” The idea is that, over time, patterns emerge to help a person discern how God is calling him or her in life. In essence, when one follows this spiritual discipline, that person is sleeping with bread—truly holding on to what gives him or her life.

Most of us have asked the questions: “What am I supposed to do with my life?” “Why am I here?” “What is my purpose?” We often wish that we were like Samuel in our Old Testament lesson today, who heard God’s voice calling him directly. This *theophany*, or call narrative—the appearance of God or a representative of God in sound, vision, or through our other senses—also happens to Abraham, Moses, Gideon, Isaiah, and Mary, just to name a few. In making themselves available to God, Samuel and the others’ lives are changed. They have a purpose given by God, but it may not have been what they were hoping for in their lives. Instead, the call is something they could not have asked for or even imagined, and it transforms the world.

To those of us today who are used to being the gods of our own lives, this may sound terrifying. We may think we want to hear and know God's call to us, but secretly we don't, because it will change us. After all, when we are focused on living from a place of love and not fear, it does change us. The simple questions that the Linns propose in their book bring us slowly and gently closer to where God is beckoning. In truth, we are like Samuel, who hears God's call but does not understand the call's source. We need a variety of ways to help us discern whether the voice we are hearing in our lives is from God or our own desire. The *Spiritual Examen* is an excellent framework for this task.

Additionally, the Linns suggest talking with others about the answers to the two questions, in order to get a communal perspective. This is similar to the example set in Samuel's call narrative, where he keeps hearing God's voice, mistaking it for Eli's, and finally gets advice from Eli about it. It is useful in our own faith journeys to talk with a person or small group of people who are faithful and trusted about where we hear God calling. Receiving an outside perspective can help us see things that we cannot see ourselves. In this way, we are able to say, "Here I am," to God thoughtfully and with an openness of heart that occurs when we are supported in our exploration. This is life-giving and aids us in sleeping with bread, each in our own way.

Eating bread to sustain life is seen as a teachable moment in our Gospel story today. When the Pharisees criticize Jesus and his disciples for gleaning from the fields on the Sabbath, Jesus reminds them that when David, called by God and anointed by Samuel, was a fugitive being hunted by Saul, he stopped in the "house of God" for safety and food. The high priest gave David the consecrated bread that was reserved for priests in order to sustain the lives of David and his companions. Jesus highlights this story in conjunction with the reminder that "the Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath." The benefits of God benefit everyone, for God created the Sabbath, and to get mired in the rigidity of human law limits the scope of any benefits it may have held. The reason for the Sabbath was and is to promote life and praise God as our creator and liberator. The Pharisees knew this, but were focused on the letter of the law and not the spirit in which Jesus applies it. Jesus is directly stating that he is the Son of Man and Lord of the Sabbath, which affirms his authority and puts him in conflict with the Pharisees. Jesus is doing God's will, while the Pharisees are focused on gathering evidence against him.

Jesus takes this life-giving stance even further in the synagogue when he cures the man with the withered hand, restoring him to wholeness and to his community, while at the same time knowing that the Pharisees were watching and hoping to gather more evidence against he who was scandalously claiming to be more than a mere mortal teacher. Human nature has not changed much in the intervening centuries. How often do we go to a worship service with a preconceived idea of what we should see or get or feel from it? We mount our own evidence against who is there and what they are doing. As with many things, we see or get or feel exactly what we put into an experience, and that often means we leave, like the Pharisees in this story, self-satisfied with the knowledge we were expecting—instead of open to God's vision. Again, we find Jesus leading us by example, following God's will and speaking God's truth in the face of those who want to maintain the *status quo*.

These stories of Jesus bringing life and truth on the Sabbath are instructive to us today. How is the Sabbath life-giving for us? Do we keep the Sabbath with the same spirit as Jesus in these stories? Think about it this way: we see Jesus, the Son of God, healing and giving life, while the Pharisees and Herodians seek human vengeance to destroy life. Not just to slander him or do something to complicate Jesus' life, but to outright *destroy* him. That choice of powerful language explicitly implies annihilation of another person. Herein lie the answers to understanding what the spirit of consolation and spirit of desolation are. How are we paying attention to the life-giving spirit of God in our own lives, and how can we support others in doing the same? When we find the spirit of desolation hovering within us, how do we return to following Jesus? Reflecting on those places of life-giving energy—where we light up and the world lights up with us—can refocus our eyes on the new thing that God is doing in our lives. Sometimes others have to hold the Christ light for us when we do not know the path, and sometimes others must share their bread with us, so we may sleep through the night, like the refugee children during the war. In turn, it is our commission to do the same for others, as Jesus did.

Discernment is a never-ending process that is part of our lifelong Christian faith. As we engage the questions of what gives us life and what does not in this season of our lives, God will beckon us to another path, another way to the heart of the Sabbath at another time. Where we find our grateful moments today may be different in ten or twenty years. The most important thing is that we continue to seek and follow Jesus wherever he leads us with truth and love. AMEN.

The Rev. Danae M. Ashley, MDiv, MA, LMFTA is an Episcopal priest and Marriage and Family Therapist who has ministered with parishes in North Carolina, New York, and Minnesota. She is serving part-time as the Associate Rector at St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Seattle. She is also a therapist at Soul Spa Seattle, LLC. Her favorite pastimes include hiking with her husband and beloved dog (Alvie Anne), reading, traveling, visiting with family and friends, dancing with wild abandon to Celtic music, and serious karaoke.