

Jesus says “abide in me.” And when I think of “abide,” I think of its close cognate “reside,” and when I think of “reside” I think of home. So Jesus is inviting us “home,” the place where, when we come there, they have to let us in - to paraphrase the poet Robert Frost. In the best of circumstances, home invokes warm and happy memories, a sense of security and comfort. So then why would the author of today’s Gospel use such provocative and offensive imagery coupled with this invitation?

Without explicitly saying so, John is pointing to the Eucharist, a rite that was well established by the time John wrote his Gospel. Unlike the authors of the Synoptic Gospels, John wants us to see the understand that the Eucharistic meal is tied to Jesus’ LIFE, and that eternal life is an invitation to live a way of life that deprives fear from having the upper hand.¹ Thus he uses images of life: flesh and blood, with his imagery of bread and wine. He means to invoke in his Jewish listeners the manna from heaven, and to show that in Jesus we have more than what was provided to our spiritual ancestors as they wandered in the wilderness.

¹ Amy C. Howe, “Pastoral Perspective,” *Feasting on the Word Year B Volume 3*, David L. Bartlett & Barbara Brown Taylor, eds, (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, KY) 2009, 382.

In our Gospel last week, it was Jesus' opponents who objected to the imagery of eating flesh and drinking blood - who hear Jesus too literally and who do not understand the invitation to live fully embodied and fully inspired by God. This week, Jesus' own followers find his teaching "too difficult," and separate from him. John shows us that while Jesus can attract large crowds of people, he is unable to retain more than a few of them. This ought to hearten those of us who are experiencing declining numbers in our parishes, even Jesus had difficulty keeping his numbers up!

And that is not a fatuous comment. Jesus is offering us a choice and not everyone chooses to accept what Jesus offers. Certainly Peter and the close inner circle said "yes" to Jesus. Saying "yes," to Jesus means that we, like the close inner circle, come together as a community of faith. As a community of faith, we try to embrace Jesus' way of living, a life dedicated to living in a manner consistent with God's purposes. A life that was unafraid to confront systemic injustice, to speak truth to power, to live with compassion, understanding and charity toward others. We profess that God chose to become human, to dwell among us and engage with us, allowed injustice to put him to death, and overcome that injustice in resurrection from the dead. God, in the end, prevails.

In seeking to accept Jesus' invitation, we allow our faith to work on us such that it is reflected in our work, by how we use our money, how we interact with our family, our friends, our neighbors. It is even reflected in whether we chose to live or die on behalf of our neighbors and for Christ. We come to realize that if God became human, like you and like me, then we are no better nor worse than any other child of God. We realize that if Jesus is God incarnate, we too are meant to be embodied and inspirited. This is what Jesus means when he says that the spirit gives life, the flesh is useless. It is a call to see how precious ALL life is, that it isn't disposable or simply a possession, to be used thoughtlessly and without care. This invitation is, in short, the work of a lifetime. Consequently, a successful parish should not only be measured by how many butts there are in the seats, but also on how well we emulate the life of Christ together because it IS too difficult to do alone. Choosing life as God meant it to be lived, this wonderful, precious gift from God - is meant to be shared - we want to invite others to share this with us, however, we can only invite - it's the invitees choice whether to stay.

And in as much as our Gospel points to Eucharist, our Epistle points to baptism and it too, is offering us a choice between good and evil. The

tiny Christian Ephesian community was countercultural - they lived out the Christian life in a hostile environment. Similar to our Gospel, this letter is a call to be fearless in living out the Christian life. Evil was understood to be a real, potent force that underlies some human actions. This passage is one of the reasons our baptismal covenant includes the renunciation of evil and a purposeful choosing to follow Christ.

The use of the metaphor of Roman armor is meant to be used in defense of the good, of the Christian way of life. In using this metaphor, Paul is urging the church to rely on truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation, and the Holy Spirit as the sure defense against evil. Paul is urging the church to be firm and steadfast in its convictions of God's great mercy and love for us. In this way we can be humble and risk taking unpopular positions, we can stand for justice.

Some Christians who took this teaching to heart include William Wilberforce, who worked for 20 years to pass legislation that abolished the British slave trade, and Nelson Mandela, who endured nearly 30 years in prison as he stood against the evil of apartheid. Their stand for justice required focus, singleness of purpose, compassion, and a willingness to be open to critical evaluation. Certainly the struggle of African-Americans has

been on-going for centuries, and I would be remiss if I did not mention Episcopal Seminarian Jonathan Daniels, who was martyred 50 years ago this month. Their work obviously took a great deal of time. They prepared for the struggle, they learned what they were up against so that they could purposefully prepare to engage in the struggle successfully. Part of that preparation requires spiritual discipline and nurturing their inner life with God.²

Closer to home, we can say that Rona Harding did much the same when she made people see that yes, St. Mary's County does have a homeless population and we need to do something about it. Her insight and persistence eventually lead to the establishment of Three Oaks and our food pantry, ministries with which we continued to be involved.

As a parish community we know that we have struggled from time to time to pay the bills and find the volunteers for the outreach efforts that are so central to our identity in living out our life in Christ. Some of us are tired and maybe even despair. Yet Scripture is urging us to choose a life in Christ, to be rooted in Christ, to stand firm in Christ. Standing firm will give our struggle a sense of purpose and give us meaning. In the months

² Archie Smith, "Pastoral Perspective," *Feasting on the Word, Year B Volume 3*, p376,378.

ahead, we will purposefully look at how we engage in all of our ministries and look for ways that we can do them efficiently and effectively. We will find opportunities to simply have fun and put our struggles aside by hosting a new book group and bringing the pig roast back. I trust that we all want to abide with Christ and experience the comforts of the home he offers us. I know I am greatly looking forward to seeing what the Holy Spirit will do with us, here at Ascension. I am confident that she will equip us for whatever lies ahead and is already celebrating our homecoming in Christ.

Amen.