

Sermon for August 1

“The Root”

This week we continue learning from the Gospel of John, the fourth gospel of Jesus Christ. The passage this week covers a passage that is significant to me in its message and I believe that as a believer there is quite a bit we can learn from this passage. Combined with our other scriptures for the day, we get a foundation of who we are as believers. We find the Root of our faith and the root of our existence. The Gospel today pushes us to try to understand the relationship between God and us.

The title for today’s sermon is titled simply the Root, because I understand that the relationship between God and believer is at the root of our faith. The root of our faith is simple and yet sometimes unfathomable at the same time. While in college, I took a personal interest in understanding the relationship between God and believer. I learned that we have believe in a God that is beyond our understanding, yet we also believe in a God that is there and accessible by all of us.

The Gospel reading today is a part of a larger story on Christ discussing the feeding of the five thousand. The day after the feeding, the crowd looked for Christ and sought him out. They were seeking more food, rather than looking for the Son of God. Christ calls them out on this, and gives instructions to the crowd to follow and offers an explanation of the understanding of the bread of life.

The instructions are simple and the explanation brief, yet I find this passage offers insight to the relationship that we have with God. Christ instructs us to not seek out the food that is perishable, but the food that leads to eternal life, the bread of life that comes through Christ. This bread comes through believing in Christ that he was the Son of Man. The bread is not physical

bread, but a way to look at the promise given to us by God. To receive the bread we are to have a relationship with Christ.

Christ interprets the story of when Moses gave the manna from heaven to those in the wilderness. Christ states that the manna would have perished had the bread come from Moses. Instead, the source of the manna was from God the Father the source of life. This is the root of who we are.

One of the interpretations of this story is a comparison to what has been given to us in the Hebrew Scriptures and the Gospel. My dear Lutheran friends often discuss a relationship between the Law of Moses and the Gospel. In some branches of the Lutheran church, there is a focus that the Law of Moses endures and it is something that our faith is solidly built upon and Christ fulfills the law and gives us eternal life through himself. I don't disagree with much of that, but I often find sometimes if we focus too greatly on the Law we often become legalistic and narrow in our view of Christ.

Christ came forth to the law and he at times broke the Law of Moses, because he had a message to reach out to those who needed to have a relationship with God. Christ was able to include all people into the story of God, both Jew and Gentile. I believe that Christ still cared deeply about the law of our spiritual ancestors, but he offered a new life, a new root, that we can come forward and build upon. This root is the bread of life, the eternal life and relationship with God.

This is a pretty straightforward interpretation of this story and I find the simplicity of the story to be helpful, a message that can be given to people, particularly those new to the faith. The story can give us some courage to be disciples, because we have the Bread of Life as believers, the presence of God in our lives that is always with us even when think that God is not there.

But the idea of the bread of life offers an interpretation of this story that gives us insight to our relationship with God and the courage that we can have being believers. There is an element to this story that is easy to overlook and it is what we receive from having a relationship with God. The insight to this relationship that I will speak, doesn't come forth in mainstream Christianity today. It has been a little while since this theologian Paul Tillich was at the center of modern theological thought. Yet his writings offer up an understanding of the Gospels that are still relevant today.

About a half a century ago a Tillich tried to interpret theology from a modern viewpoint and make the story of Christianity applicable to people of his day. It's the same work that theologians have worked on for centuries, taking the story that we knew and heard and then offer up an insight that we can understand and relate to today.

Paul Tillich was a Lutheran pastor and was a part of the Christian Existential movement, which means that he tried to make sense of our existence and find a way to live our lives to the fullest. Tillich saw that the idea of living your life to the fullest was something that Christians had lost, due to conflicts and due to the lackluster theology that many in the church had adopted.

He was a prolific writer, writing many, many books and his thought was appealing both to the masses and to intellectuals. When he was a University Professor at Harvard University students and teachers from all disciplines would listen to his lectures because of his appeal and to the thought and interpretation that he was offering the world at his time. Through various classes, many of Tillich's books have made it me and have become a part of my library.

With this understanding of Tillich, he offers up an interpretation of the relationship we have with God and the Bread of Life, rooted in the scriptures that he studied and from he learned from colleagues. Tillich's book *The Courage to Be* was a book that meant a lot to me, as I read it

during a rough patch while I was in college. It was a comfort and gave me a direction to go when I am discouraged.

The *Courage to Be* is a 190 page book written to explain the very last sentence of the the book. The end sentence is that “the courage to be is rooted in the God who appears when God disappears in the anxiety of doubt.” Now that’s a rough sentence to hear read aloud, so don’t feel like you need to comprehend it all at once. In fact, the idea behind that sentence is clearer and more applicable to us as believers, particularly as believers who want to spread the Gospel to the community and to the world.

The courage that is discussed in this book is the simple courage to go about our daily life. We get up in the morning, brush our teeth, drink coffee and head off to work or our daily activities. How often have you thought about what you do on a day to day basis? Does it take courage to wake up and face the world? I believe there is courage there, because we don’t always know what is going to happen on a daily basis. We may have a schedule or a set routine, but that can get turned upside down on a moment’s notice. Every day is indeed, a new day with possibilities.

In that day to day life we live with anxiety, as there is anxiety in many daily activities. Anxiety isn’t always a bad thing, as it can push us in positive directions, causing creativity. Anxiety can also wreck our daily life if we don’t have a foundation to work with. We can get lost in our daily life. We can lose direction. Perhaps we don’t know where we are to be or where we are going in our life.

There are sometimes days where we wonder where God is as we face hardship, whether be as simple as the loosing of a sentimental possession, or in the loss of a job, or other heavy

loss. Sometimes we feel abandoned. We feel lost. We feel that there is no one out there for us. Sometimes we give up on God and try to push forward, but we don't always succeed.

Tillich offers up that the relationship we have with God is the courage to get up in the morning, the courage to go about our daily routine. God is the courage that we have when we face anxiety. God is also there when we feel that God has totally and completely abandoned us. God is always there, even if we don't feel that presence in the hardships of life.

The reason for this is that as mortal humans we lose focus and sometimes we withdraw so much into the world that we no longer have the right perspective. This isn't our fault as mortals, as we can get so caught up in what is happening around us. We fail at being good believers and followers of Christ.

As human beings we start to put the emphasis of our being on earthly things, like events, objects, ideas. These are not everlasting elements. These things are like the food that perishes. These are things that if we put our existence into that we will surely fail and lose ourselves in our life. These are roots that do not allow us to grow in our faith. We need to place our lives into the hands of God, so that we know that the root of our being is everlasting, as everlasting the wonder of God.

In our hardship and pain, there's God there with us, crying along and grieving with us. When we have no hope, we are promised hope. When we feel we have lost our relationship with God, we have the assurance that the Bread of Life that Christ promises us is there.

We have the assurance that God is with us because God is an eternal being and the creator of everything we know. The Bread of Life and assurance of God being with us is not physical. The love of God does not disappear from us. It is not perishable, just as Christ promised us. The love of God for us is far beyond anything we can comprehend.

But have we have hope that help us live out with our existence rooted in God. The scriptures give us many examples of how we can put our faith in God and move forward living the life that God wants us to live. The Apostle Paul often wrote on how we can live out our lives as believers who have given up their life to God. He also wrote on many theological topics to give people a direction to put their belief. Paul does write about the root that we have been talking about. Paul writes about the root being faith itself.

In Galatians we have a passage that offers us up hope as believers. Paul writes about how we are saved from this world, about how we are saved by the anxiety of doubt and the anxiety of when we feel that God has abandoned us. In Galatians 2:15-21 which we read today Paul writes that we are not saved by acts of the law or by things that would make us look good before others.

There was dispute in early Christian communities that those that were not of the Jewish faith could be saved. Some people believed that the law would save people, so all people needed to follow the law to a letter. This created division among the early Christian community. It caused some anxiety, it caused some people to question whether people could experience the love of God in their lives. Paul writes that indeed, all people can be saved through faith in Christ and in placing the root of our existence in God.

Paul writes about our nature as sinners, as a people that gets lost in the world. But we have to place our faith in Christ and in the Bread of Life that is offered to us. Our faith in Christ is something special, it is what makes us the believers that we are today. We give up the elements that we think that might save us, the elements that would make us happy in this world. Instead as Christians we offer up ourselves in Christ, to be crucified with him and to have life in Christ and allow Christ to live in us. We are called to be a light to the world and our faith in Christ and God will allow us to become the people that live a full and complete life.

In academic circles we sometimes begin to do what I call “scholarly gymnastics.” Basically, it is when in class we get so caught up on a point that we spend all of our time spinning around, jumping through hoops, and flying all around something that totally misses the point of what the text is speaking. This Galatians passage is one of those passages that often gets caught up in debate that is really about making a claim about the text that is not there, or interpreting the text from something totally and completely unrelated. The gymnastics come about when someone makes a claim that indeed we have to do something to make ourselves right with God. The claim is often contrary with what the Apostle Paul writes, instead trying to focus on something outside of the scriptures.

I admit, I sometimes get caught in these gymnastics when I lose focus on what is important. I often have an adventure in missing the point of the scriptures. Being a religious studies nerd I am inclined to think about the academic elements of a text, but sometimes those academic pursuits really don’t offer much for a life in Christ. It is a challenge that I face in making the text real for myself. I know that academics will not save me and I pray that I can have the faith that will push me past these gymnastics, because I know that I am a sinner and the presence of God is what makes me who I am.

I am here to tell you, there is no act on this earth, no law that we can follow, no academics that will be the root of our existence. Our root, the root of our being is placed by having faith that Christ indeed is the Son of Man and through Christ we have the presence of God in our lives. We can be a people with the presence of God, even in the deepest times of trouble.

Placing the root is not just a personal action. Putting the community’s faith in God is a way to live out the Gospel and live out the life that Paul writes about in Galatians. The

community of believers should be willing to place their existence in God, not in the building, not in things that will come to pass. The community should be just as willing to place their existence in God and have faith that the Holy Spirit will descend upon the community and make us a community that can spread the Bread of Life to all people. By being crucified in Christ we open ourselves upon to be a community that takes the Gospel to people who need to hear it in this world. We can become a community that takes care of all people and meets them where they are in this life. As a body composed of believers in the Gospel we can have the courage to reach out and make a difference in the world and make a world more just and loving.

Today, I want to empower you to take up your faith, to look within and to see where you put your faith in your personal root. We all have a root to our faith and if you don't have a root to your faith, then come and talk with us. God is there waiting for you to take up the cross and follow Christ in this world. The community that is here is available to all of those who seek a relationship with God that can be the root of their existence.

Today, as we go out and go about our daily lives, have the faith that God is with you always. Live this week with God as the root of your existence. In the hard times this week, remember that God is always with you, no matter what the world throws at us. Have the courage to be that God loves us and calls us to be better believers in Christ, because that is who we are. We are believers, believers in a better tomorrow for all people. Let God be the root in your life, and let that root become a part of the faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord and Savior.