

Sermon preached by The Rev. Charles Rowins at St. Christopher-by-the-Sea, Gibson Island, Maryland, 14th Sunday after Pentecost, August 26, 2018.

The focus of my ministry has been education. I like to teach, in part because there is always a challenge. You know that you will probably reach some, but you also know that you probably won't reach all. For this reason, today's gospel intrigues me (**John 6:56-69**).

Jesus is teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum. The students include the disciples, but there are others, perhaps looking to the disciples to clarify what Jesus is saying. Clearly some clarification is necessary. Jesus says, "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."

Even some of the disciples complained that "this teaching is difficult." Well, if the disciples, who knew him best, were having a difficult time, imagine the challenge for the first-time listeners. Aware that he might be losing his audience, Jesus asks, "Does this offend you? The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. But among you there are some who do not believe."

At this point, the audience is at least listening, if not understanding. Jesus goes on: "For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father." This assurance is different than "If you're having a tough time understanding, see me after class." No, Jesus says, "Are you with me or not?" Some "turned back and no longer went about with him." Others though fell into line: "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of Israel."

One of the realities of teaching is that the teacher can never be sure how the student will process material. Will it help? Will it stick? Will it be a positive influence? Some of the students who appear most receptive don't do well. Some of the students who appear the least receptive do really well. What role did the teacher play in these outcomes? One doesn't know, unless the student, now an adult, shares the impact. If it's a good impact, the teacher signs up for another year! If not, the teacher probably signs up for another year anyway. Success is more than one student.

Our first reading today is from the Book of Joshua (**Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18**). Joshua is the successor to Moses. Under Moses, the Hebrews return to the Promised Land. Joshua's task is help the people get resettled. He calls a meeting, "gathering all the tribes and summoning the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers." At this meeting, Joshua makes certain things clear. "Now therefore revere the Lord, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness. If you are unwilling to serve the Lord, serve somebody, but get out of our way." The people respond to their new leader: "Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods; for it is the Lord our God who brought us and our ancestors up from the land of Egypt."

Right answer. Joshua is off to a good start. And, so are the people. They get the message of this morning's Psalm: "And none will be punished who trust in him." Referring to the Lord, not Joshua.

But, as we know, the "start" of the resettlement would give way to a series of disappointments. Obedience would be followed by disobedience and sometimes exile. These periods of exile would be followed by a return to obedience and the Promised Land and a new era of prosperity. But the prosperity would not last. The Hebrews were, and are, well acquainted with cycles.

So too was Paul, himself a Jew, whose life was interrupted and turned around by the Risen Christ. For Paul, the cycles of life were less about external forces than internal ones (**Ephesians 6:10-20**). "For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places."

Paul speaks of a "shield of faith with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil ones." When you, as parents or godparents or grandparents, encourage young people to include God in their lives, through church attendance or social service or being a good neighbor, aren't you really trying to help them develop a "shield of faith"?

Life is tough enough with a "shield of faith." How tough must it be without one? "Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God." This is the advice that young people, indeed all of us, need. And it's not just

a matter of need. Isn't it a matter of desire as well? Don't we ourselves want to be equipped to handle the challenges that life can dish out?

Let's go back to the classroom for a moment. Isn't it true that when our teachers told us to close our books and listen carefully, and then proceeded to illustrate a message with a very personal story, we listened. Our teacher was human. Our teacher had feelings. Our teacher struggled. Our teacher cared enough about us to share something really personal, not for his or her benefit, but for ours. Our teacher wanted us to have a "shield of faith." Not a denominational identity, but a source of love, strong enough to get us through tough times.

In the passage from Ephesians, Paul does exactly this. He is begging us to accept what the Risen Lord can provide. "Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints. Pray also for me."

Did you ever have a friend or relative or teacher, in the wake of a deep personal loss, ask you to pray with him or her? "Right now, I need your friendship and your prayers." At that moment, the person was sharing his or her "shield of faith," but perhaps also commending a "shield of faith" for you. It's what we all want for ourselves and those we love.

The temptation with a "shield" image is that the trials and tribulations of this life will simply bounce off. We know better than that. A shield of faith doesn't deflect. It might not even soften the blow. Rather it puts the blow in context, a context of a loving and understanding God.

The shield of faith for Jesus didn't prevent his death, but assured him, and assures you and me, that death is a transition, not a finality. God treated the sting of death for Jesus with an ointment called the Resurrection. You and I have access to that ointment. And not just at death, but at all times when, by our actions or someone else's action, we need help beyond ourselves. Faith is that shield.

Verse 18 of **Psalm 34**: "The Lord is near to the broken-hearted * and delivers them from all their troubles." What a marvelous gift, and available, not for the asking, though that's an important ingredient, but for the receiving. The Lord is there at any time, any place, any situation. Incredible? Yes! To which we say, Amen.