

A Sermon for the Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost 2015
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Exactly eighteen months ago when I began my tenure as your Interim Rector, we all knew this day was coming. In fact, getting safely to this day, my last day with all of you, was the whole point of my being here at all. But knowing that a departure is coming doesn't make it easier, at least not for me. The chairs in the sanctuary are probably breathing a sigh of relief, though.

Since there won't be anyone in the pulpit next week, I want to finish up the chapter of John we have been reading from for the last six weeks, Jesus' long conversation about bread. After today's gospel lesson, the chapter finishes like this:

When many of his disciples heard it, they said, "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?" But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, "Does this offend you? Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. But among you there are some who do not believe." For Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe, and who was the one that would betray him. And he said, "For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father." Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. So Jesus asked the twelve, "Do you also wish to go away?" Simon Peter answered him, "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 God." Jesus answered them, "Did I not choose you, the twelve? Yet one of you is a devil." He was speaking of Judas son of Simon Iscariot, for he, though one of the twelve, was going to betray him.

Hard teachings, departures, betrayals, complaints. And yet, amid all of that, spirit and life.

Jesus' followers' doubt and confusion makes sense to me. They were, after all, being sent out to bring bread to the world without a whole lot to make their journeys easy or even safe. They were not sure where they were going, or what they would find, or how they would be received. They were to go without raincoats or laptops or cell phones or Power Bars or cans of Red Bull. If they were to be paid, they could expect wages not from the one who sent them, but only from the ones who received them, and they were told that some people would receive them badly. And Jesus had even told them that there were not enough of them to accomplish what they are being sent to do. In other words, they had no idea what was going to happen to them next. But, when Jesus asked his closest friends if they too wanted to abandon Jesus and his calling, Peter, who doesn't always get things right, nails it this time – "where else can we go? You have the word of eternal life." Life without Jesus wouldn't really be life. We don't know what we're doing, or where we're going, or what will happen next, but we know we have to do it with Jesus.

And, of course, stories like this, and times of transition such as everyone at St. James' Church is facing now, can help remind us that this is the permanent condition of our lives. Although we derive comfort and strength from the

likelihood that our lives will be more or less the same tomorrow as they are today, we can never really have any certainty that tomorrow, or even this afternoon, won't bring a sudden change in fortunes or circumstances, either for good or for ill.

Neither winning the lottery nor getting hit by a bus is likely enough to even think about, but meeting a new friend, losing something or someone of value, unexpected success or failure, all of these things are quite possible, and even inevitable, if not tomorrow, then someday.

And in the uncertain world, Jesus tells his disciples, and us, to act. The disciples are given a simple task. Meet the world as you find it, use the strengths you have to make it better than it is, and tell people that the good you do is a sign of God's love, and not your own worth. That's the simple truth of it. Go. Feed, heal, help, mend, love those you find. And tell those you meet that God means for them to be healed, helped, mended, and loved. That when those things happen, the love of God has touched their lives.

And if the people you meet, Jesus says, don't want the gifts you bring, it doesn't make any difference. The message is still the same. Don't stick around where you are not wanted, but deliver the same message as you go: the love of God has touched you today. The reign of God is very near.

And that's my farewell message for all of you. If you have been healed, if you have been heartened, if you have been strengthened, if you have been loved by

anyone, the love of God has touched you. The reign of God has come so near to you that you can touch it in return. The reign of God, which is not a place we hope to dwell, but the fulfillment of God's love for each of us, eternal life experienced in the here and now, is impinging on our lives, is breaking into the world, is being accomplished all around us, by every act of love and grace that any of us make. Those who serve others are the openings through which the reign of God bursts into the world.

As I say good bye to you, I know less about my future right now than you all know about yours. I can relate to the confusion and anxiety that Jesus' disciples felt when he sent them out into the world. But I can also relate to their joy. I have been fed, strengthened, healed and loved during my time here. You have been bread for me, both spiritual and actual. I leave here with a wealth and richness of experiences that have changed me, and, I hope, made me wiser. I have been blessed by all of you, and I leave you with my blessing.

So, like the disciples, who knew they had been touched by the love of God and so went fearfully and yet joyfully out into the unknown, if you have been touched, if you have been fed, if you have been healed, if you have been loved, Jesus is calling you to love and heal the world as you encounter it, and to declare that it is God's love that you are sharing.

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.

Amen.