

“Choose Life!”
Sermon by Rev. Leah Fowler
Presbyterian Church in Leonia
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Deuteronomy 30:15-20
1 Corinthians 3:1-9

Iraenaus of Lyon, a Roman church Bishop in the late 2nd century, advised Christians to “take refuge in the Church, to drink milk at her breast, to be fed with the Scriptures of the Lord.” He went on to say that the church has been “planted in the world as a paradise.”¹

Paul describes feeding the church in Corinth with milk because they are not yet ready for solid food. As my own daughter is about to turn 5 years old, I have been waxing nostalgic for the days when she was still a baby as I revisit pictures and videos of her over the past 5 years. When she was still eating baby food, I wrote this Psalm for her as a praise to God for her life and her daily act of eating:

I was glad when they said unto me,
'Time to climb your highchair and eat.'
I lift mine eyes to the top of the chair.
From where does my food come?

My food comes from the Lord
Who prepares a table before me.
My sippy cup overfloweth.

Yea, though I smear yogurt all over my face
And butternut squash into the folds of my neck,
Deep, deep into the folds,
I will fear no stickiness.
For my mothers, they wipe me clean
And my dog, she finishes the job.

¹ Richard M. Simpson, “1 Corinthians 3:1-9: Homiletical Perspective” in *Feasting on the Word Year A: Advent-Transfiguration*

Praise the Lord, who gives me food and family!
Blessed is the name of the Lord!

Paul sees the new followers of Jesus in the church in Corinth at a stage similar to an infant: spiritually, they are eating milk and need the nurture of teachings by religious leaders, but ultimately, it is God who gives the growth. When Paul tells the church “you were not ready for solid food. Even now you still are not ready” I wonder how much of this is Paul’s cleverness with words that sets the reader up to insist, “Oh, but I am ready! Or at least, I want to be! What is this solid food that you say I cannot yet have? Please give it to me!” I remember as a child everything my mother told me I was not old enough to do or have became top priority on the things I wanted to experience or possess. I try to remember this fact as I choose my response when my daughter asks me if she can wear my lipstick.

The scripture implies that the church in Corinth was dealing with a crisis of leadership: as some followed Paul, and others followed Apollos, their sense of unity crumbled and their focus was on infighting rather than faithfulness, jealousy rather than Jesus.

As we prepare to enter our Annual Meeting, I am glad that although we sometimes disagree, we do not have the level of divisions to which Paul speaks in his letter to the church in Corinth. But I do feel those divisions in our country. People who see themselves as patriots, loving and loyal to their country, talk about the country as if it were two different places. Our church is called to give a hopeful witness in times of deep brokenness.

I have been reflecting lately on the legacy of US Representative John Lewis, who represents my home district back in Atlanta, GA. John Lewis, who is black, grew up on a farm in rural Alabama in a time when racial discrimination was the law of the land. John Lewis as a boy would question these laws to his older relatives, who told him,

“That’s the way it is. Don’t get in the way. Don’t get in trouble.”

But John Lewis, even as a child, was called to something different. He remembers, “Now, when I was very young, I fell in love with raising chickens, and I loved those chickens. I talked to those chickens. I preached to those chickens and I used to cry when my mother or father wanted to kill one of those chickens for dinner. They became part of my life, and my first nonviolent protests were protesting against my parents for getting rid of some of those chickens.”

As he got older, he took his nonviolent protests to another level, working in the movement with The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and other civil rights leaders, going to sit-ins at lunch counters that were for whites only, and marching for freedom in Selma, AL where he was beaten unconscious in the head. He says about that moment, there may “come a time where you have to be prepared to literally put your physical body in the way to go against something that is evil, unjust, and you prepare to suffer the consequences.”

But through it all, John Lewis held a vision of what a beloved community could be. When he was 11 years old, he went to visit some cousins up in Buffalo, NY. He had no idea black people could actually live like that, free from the Jim Crow laws of the South that treated blacks as if they were less than human. Lewis said “being there gave me hope. I wanted to believe, and I did believe, that things would get better. I discovered that *you have to have this sense of faith that what you’re moving toward is already done*. It’s already happened. It’s the power to believe that you can see, that you visualize, that sense of community, that sense of family, that sense of one house. If you visualize it, if you can even have faith that it’s there.”²

Like John Lewis’ vision of what a beloved community could be, something that he would work for and live into even though he could not yet see, God gave the Hebrews a vision as they prepared to cross the Jordan River. God gave the Israelites a vision of life and prosperity, formed by following the commandments God had set on their hearts. For years the Hebrews had

² John Lewis interviewed by Krista Tippett, “The Art and Discipline of Nonviolence.” *NPR On Being* March 28, 2013

wandered in the wilderness, living only by the food that God provided them each day, manna and quail, and learning how to rely completely on God. Crossing the Jordan, they would be aliens in a foreign land. God would not spoon feed them with manna and quail, and God's law. God reminded them that it would be their daily choice to follow God, and that they were not entering a new land to serve other gods or other rulers.

With the heavens and the earth as God's audience, God challenges the Hebrews, "I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the Lord swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob."

As we prepare to take communion today, for some it will be like milk, and for some it will be solid food. We are all on different points in our spiritual journeys. But this taste is a foretaste or vision of the life to which God calls us. It is a hopeful meal. For even in the bread, broken into so many pieces, we know we can be part of a whole body of Christ. If Jesus' broken body can be made whole again, there is hope for us and there is hope for this land. Choose life! Amen.