

Bread in the Wilderness

One time I went on a retreat to a monastery. I do this every now and then. It happened that this particular time, I was in the middle of one of those dry spells, where God seemed very far away from me (or I felt very far away from God), where I felt that my spiritual well was running dry. So it wasn't just rest and prayer that I needed. I needed to reconnect and experience the divine as something real. I needed sustenance. And I really didn't know what to do.

So I sat with a brother and confessed my spiritual dryness and asked for help. Monks are great in situations like this - they don't look at you in horror and ask what's wrong with you, you religious professional? Instead, they nod sagely. They understand spiritual dryness. They understand the distressing disconnection that can happen between you and God in the midst of real life and they don't offer up some platitude like "just trust in God and it will all work out" or ask you if you've prayed about it.

Nope. The brother assigned me an art project. I looked at him with one eyebrow raised. He meant it. Upstairs in the library I would find a sketch pad and some colored pencils. Maybe I could draw an expression of my feelings or my situation. I felt like a first grader.

I spent a long time not going up to the library before I decided, since I really was distressed, to give it a try. After all, trying to think my way out of it had not worked. Now, I consider myself an artistic person, but I can't actually draw very well. Of course, this wasn't about creating a beautiful picture anyway.

I let my colored pencil range around on the paper. And then, I don't know, I kind of got into it.

What I ended up with after a while was a simple drawing of a heart locked in a cave. There was yellow light coming out of the cave and it was dark around the outside of the cave, and across the entrance was a portcullis, one of those medieval gates on a castle. I didn't know if that was my heart locked up or if it was God that was locked up, whether something was locked in or I was locked out, but either way, it seemed a fair representation of how I was feeling. I looked at it for a long time.

The next morning I went into the chapel for the service of Holy Eucharist. I got there a few minutes early and sat gazing at the beautiful marble altar, which is situated under an arched marble canopy supported by marble columns (the technical term is baldachin for you church architecture nerds). And as my eyes rested on it, I became aware of how much it looked like that cave I had drawn in my simple picture. That cave that held the heart. That cave that held the light.

I don't remember what the lessons were that morning nor do I recall the sermon. What I experienced was a sudden intense desire for the bread and the wine that sat on the altar. I could hardly wait for the celebrant to finish the Eucharistic prayer and give out that bread and that wine.

Tears ran down my cheeks. It was the bread and wine that was the connection and it is the bread and wine that is the sustenance and all I had to do was put out my hands and receive it. Taking that bread and wine into my body was how I would become one with Christ - something I knew in my head all along but was suddenly experiencing anew in real life.

And continuing to receive it at every Eucharist was how God would sustain me in my wilderness. It was God's promise "I will be with you" made good and made real. I could touch it, I could taste it, I would eat it.

We all end up in the wilderness sometimes. Rocked by horrifying news, like this week's report about the long history of children being sexually abused by priests, strung out from family strife, exhausted from constant political drama, suffering from illness or grief or loneliness, angry about injustice, we can find ourselves bewildered, feeling lost, disconnected.

And when that happens, we long to reconnect, to experience the divine, to be sustained amid whatever it is that saps us of the life abundant Jesus wants for us.

Thomas Aquinas called the Eucharist spiritual food and spiritual medicine. St. Ignatius called it medicine for immortality. Medieval people were known to sneak communion bread out of church to keep it at home for protection from plague and other evils, which was frowned upon by the church as superstitious practice.

There is great power in the Eucharistic meal, but like medicine, it is meant to be taken into our bodies to become part of us and to strengthen us. Jesus says that is how we abide in God and God abides in us. St. Augustine thought that we should say this when distributing the bread: "Behold who you are, become what you receive."

And here's the thing. Jesus meets us where we are whenever we come to the altar to receive, even if we are in bewilderment. This is to me the most beautiful part. I like the way David Henson, a fellow Episcopal priest in North Carolina, puts it, "The bread of life doesn't come to us whole, untouched, or unscathed by the world. Instead, it comes to us broken and fractured. . . . [W]e don't come to this table unbroken either. We come feeling fractured, sometimes torn apart by the sorrows of life.

"The body of Christ is broken because we are. The blood of Christ is poured out because we are. . . . In the midst of our questions of Why God? Or our anger at the injustice in the world, Christ simply says, Me, too. I'm here. I've been forsaken. I've been wounded. Here I am, broken, too."

Behold who you are, become what you receive. Touch it and taste it and let it course through your body to sustain and heal you. Come to the altar and experience the promise of life, made good and made real.

Penny A. Nash
St. Stephen's Episcopal Church
August 19, 2018, 10 a.m.