

Pentecost XI (Proper 15B) RCL
August 16, 2009

St. Margaret's
Annapolis

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. *Amen.*

Our readings from the gospel these past few weeks have been full of images of Jesus as the bread of life. "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them," says John's Jesus. And we hear those words echoed in Eucharist every time we come to this table for "the Body of Christ, the Bread of heaven," and "the Blood of Christ, the cup of salvation."

One of the things that originally drew me to the Episcopal Church, even though I was only 15 at the time, was the sense of being fed; of being nourished and strengthened so that I could face the world. Even at that tender age, my world was anything but easy. But that's another story. Suffice it to say that I needed the sacrament, even if I could not have articulated it at the time.

Maybe you, too, have felt that way from time-to-time; that you just needed to come here to get fed.

We've also been fed these past few weeks with the gentle instructions on Christian living that Paul outlined for the new Christians in the city of Ephesus. You may remember that the Ephesians had been worshipers of the Greco-Roman pantheon of gods before their conversion to Christianity. And this letter, attributed to Paul's hand, is full of practical advice on how to live the Christian life.

"Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil," he says. [Eph. 5:15]

Be careful how you live. Don't be unwise, don't be foolish, don't get drunk, but be filled with the Spirit of God. Sing and give thanks. These are the basics. But sort of stuck right there in the middle of this little portion of the letter to these Ephesians is this bit: "...but understand what the will of the Lord is." Understand the will of God. Paul makes it sound so simple.

Ever notice how people talk about the will of God? Some folks claim to know, absolutely, no questions, what God's will is -- and they're ready to tell you in a heartbeat. Then there are those who think that if they work hard enough, they can figure it out -- the will of God, I mean. They study

scripture and pray and try very hard to pick the right thing to do or to make the right decision.

The former type, the ones who purport to know with certainty (and exactly how to apply that knowledge, not only for themselves but for everyone else, too) are folks that I usually try to avoid. I get a headache from all that certainty; all that correctness.

The later type, the ones who work so hard trying to discover what is God's will, are often so overburdened by the effort that they end up spending more time guessing what God wants than in actually living.

In both cases, the approach to knowing the will of God ends up being a lot like that old game show, "The Price is Right," I think it was... the one in which the contestant has to pick from three doors. Behind one door is a great prize; behind one of the other doors is an OK prize; and behind one is a complete dud of a prize. So the contestants have to guess which door will reveal the desirable prize.

Truth be told, a lot of us approach the will of God like that; as if we only have one chance to get it right.

And yet, in Paul's ever-so-practical letter, he says – without any fanfare, without a big production: "...understand what the will of the Lord is." Surely it's more than these ordinary exhortations to avoid drunkenness, to be filled with God's spirit, to sing and to give thanks. Isn't there more to God's will than just that?

But what if... what if it really is as simple as that? What if, instead of having to guess -- or else get a bogus prize -- God's will is as plain as the nose on your face? Could it be?

Well, suppose for a moment that it is; that understanding the will of God is as simple as, say, learning to ride a bike. Or in my case, learning to ride a horse!

Some of you kids may appreciate that I was one of those horse-crazy girls. But nobody in my family rode. Nobody I knew even had horses! But whenever I had a chance, I would sit with the encyclopedia opened to the article about horses, and I would memorize the parts of the horse which were labeled on the illustration. Then I'd turn to the page with a picture of a saddle and bridle, and memorize those parts. I watched "Fury" and "My

Friend Flicka" every Saturday morning, and I read every Black Stallion book that Walter Farley ever wrote.

When I got my first horse at the age of twelve, I knew a lot of facts, but I didn't know anything practical – like how to put the saddle or bridle on him, let alone how to actually ride. That first time out -- it was a short trial ride with a group of experienced riders -- my horse ran away with me three times!

But I got better and better at it. I learned how to do the necessary, ordinary things by hanging out with adults and older kids who let me watch and ask a million questions. And I learned how to manage my bay gelding, until -- over time -- I was one of those skilled, accomplished riders myself.

It seems to me that practicing the Christian life isn't so different than that. Some of us have grown up in the church all our lives, and we know all the right stuff, like the importance of the Bible, how to behave in church and how to take Communion. We have a pretty good idea about how the church works.

Then again, some of us might not have gotten that upbringing in a church. Maybe we came stumbling into this or some other church just vaguely aware that we were searching for something; or came in a crisis, desperately hoping that God would be here.

Either way, somewhere along the line, we started listening, and watching, and picking up things here and there about this business of Christian living. Maybe it was in a Sunday School class – some discussion of a relevant issue; or maybe it was during a baptism – hearing those baptismal vows again as if for the first time; or perhaps it's during the reading of one of the lessons – hearing Paul's words.

Either way, somewhere along the line, we will need more than the facts. It will come time to make a life-changing decision, or we will be facing a crisis. We will need some spiritual muscle, the kind that comes from practicing our faith.

But here's the really good news: if we're in one of those situations that call for spiritual muscle, but we haven't got much of it of our own, *we can depend on the collective muscle of the community of faith until we're stronger!*

That's the great thing about Christian community: there's a place for everybody, no matter where we are on our spiritual journey. And there is bread for that journey; the bread of life that is Christ Jesus.

To be sure, there is much to know about scripture and tradition. There is always more to learn about Christian history and theology. Becoming mature Christians is a life-long process.

But Christian living? According to Paul, that's pretty simple.

- Be careful how we live.
- Don't be unwise, don't be foolish, don't get drunk,
- but be filled with the Spirit of God.
- Sing and give thanks.

That's it in a nutshell. If we get those things, the rest will fall into place.

Amen.

The Reverend Lori M. Lowe