

Proper 15, Year B

Aug 18, 2024

What will You do with Your Eternal Life?

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Last week I suggested that Jesus was asking his followers and us to look beyond. Look beyond the man you think you know, the neighbor kid from Galilee, and see the bread of life, sent like manna in the wilderness, Jesus challenged his people. Look beyond the bread and wine on the communion table and see Jesus, the author of John's Gospel challenged his community.

Look beyond all of this and see God.

We continue our reading of Jesus' Bread of Life discourse in today's gospel from John. It sounds a lot like last week's Gospel, as some of you might remember.

Jesus said, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."

Here we go again. But this week rather than looking beyond, I'd like us to look inside. What happens to us when we accept Jesus's offering of himself as bread and wine, when we chew and swallow and inwardly digest the body and blood of Christ in bread and wine?

What are we saying yes to, and how does that affect who we are when we leave this place?

Those of you who grew up and were formed in Eucharistic traditions were taught that when you hear the words, The Body of Christ, the Bread of Heaven, or the Blood of Christ, the Cup of Salvation you say ... Amen.

Amen. If when you receive the bread and the wine, you say thank you, then you're welcome. All are welcome to approach this table. But if you say Amen... that's something quite different. You are saying yes to God's request to be a physical part of you, to be in communion with you, body and soul.

We talked about that last week as well, how food, when we eat it, becomes part of us. Eat this bread and drink this wine and Jesus will be coursing through your blood stream, invading your cells, becoming part of your very self.

Amen is your word of consent. At Bread Day in May the kids and I talked about how Amen sounds a bit like "come in." Body of Christ? Come in! Blood of Christ. Come in!

When you say Amen you are saying: I surrender all. You are saying, not my will but your will be done. Take my body and blood, my whole self, God, and make it yours.

There's a lot packed in to an Amen. Our end of the new covenant.

If God keeps God's part of the promise, and I believe God does, then we are affected by God's presence in us, body and soul. God's will in us, God's way for us is part of us, accessible to us. And that presence is life – eternal life, life that doesn't end, resurrection life, life for the world, Jesus says.

And my question is what do you plan to do with your eternal life?

That reminds me of Mary Oliver's poem, The Summer Day, at the end of which she asks, "Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?"

What a great question to ask as we prepare to say Amen to just such a life –wild and precious, and I would add, eternally woven into the timeless life of God. And the will of God and the way of God.

Mary Oliver was a profound prophet of the presence of God in the natural world. And I think her poem can help us to answer the question: What will you do with your eternal life? It goes like this:

Who made the world?

Who made the swan, and the black bear?

Who made the grasshopper?

This grasshopper, I mean —

the one who has flung herself out of the grass,

the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,

who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down —

who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.

Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.

Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.

I don't know exactly what a prayer is.

I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down

into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,

how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,

which is what I have been doing all day.

Tell me, what else should I have done?

Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?

Tell me, what is it you plan to do

with your one wild and precious life?¹

The Summer Day by Mary Oliver.

We might consider it our fourth reading today because it's brimming with truth about the world that we step into when we leave here, and about God who is coursing through our veins because of our Amen to receiving Christ in bread and wine.

That world is a made thing that demands our attention, our full presence, our Amen – the word for that is prayer. “All things die at last, and too soon,” Oliver announces in defense of her summer day, and that is true even as we carry God's eternal life within us. The world that is put in our hands to

¹From *New and Selected Poems*, 1992, Beacon Press, Boston, MA

love with God's love, is fragile and fleeting and stares back at us with enormous and complicated eyes.

Whatever you plan to do with your one wild and precious life, make sure it involves this level of attention and outward focus and willingness to fall down and to kneel. Make sure it involves the willingness to regard others with this spirit of wonder and awe. Make sure it strolls through fields, and also city streets and workplaces and neighborhoods and school grounds, wherever your eternal life might take you. Make sure it includes time to be this idle and blessed.

The life in the bread of life, is not only life that enters us by way of our Amen and our chewing and our swallowing. It is life for the world.

Our part in the new covenant is to take that life to where God wants it to go, and to make it available to all who need it. That is what we are called to do with our one, wild and precious and eternal life.

Amen.