

Sermon -- Year B Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 14)

August 12, 2018 -- Jennifer Masada

Becoming Christian

Jesus says, "I am the bread of life." This statement is fundamental to our Christian faith, central to our gathering ritual at this table.

How do we describe what God means to us? As New Singers, how do we talk about what it is to be Christian?

I'm not sure I have a clear answer myself, but I'd love to have a conversation with you about it. Actually, that's exactly what we do here at New Song! We talk about what God means to each of us. And what's fabulous is that we are eager to hear varied answers. In fact, that's what makes New Song special: we hold an expansive, inclusive view of God, a view that acknowledges that for every person on the planet, there's a different answer to the questions "What does God mean to you? What does it mean to be Christian?"

What does God mean to you? Answers might be:

"On the path." "Looking for purpose." "Finding self." "Seeking meaning." "Doing justice." "Learning to love one another." "Servanthood."

These are just a few of the common yearnings we hear around us, not only for Christians, but for people of faith worldwide.

Many of us at New Song are fortunate to be able to ask these questions, fortunate to wonder about our ultimate spiritual mission here on this planet. But many people in our communities have no choice than to focus on surviving – surviving illness, stress, joblessness, poverty, racism, violence, family problems, homelessness – these realities prevent many from being able to wonder.

But even those of us who are privileged enough to wonder find that we are at a new intersection. Our freedom and privilege to wonder is cut by a sharp, perpendicular path of crisis. We face political upheaval, shifting world order, global warming. Conversation with our youth reveals the stark reality that the world they inherit is very different than the world we've known.

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This time of year in Iowa City carries with it a buzz of excitement. As a university community, we roll with the familiar rhythm of the academic year. Fall semester will begin in just a week. Students are returning, faculty and staff are preparing, and the place is readying for a year of transformation through learning.

The thing is, the rhythm of academic life can provide comforting regularity. Predictability. The semester starts, learning begins, students sit for exams, the semester ends. Students start a degree program and, after years of effort, they graduate with credentials.

We can think of semesters as convenient “containers” that help us engage in learning as a process of expanding our vision and wisdom to improve the world. We learn to become our best selves. We learn to transform ourselves and the world around us. Graduating with a degree means having mastered thinking processes, gaining skills, and, most of all, continuing to learn.

How do we learn as Christians? When do we “graduate” as Christians, having mastered Christian ways?

We can take a page from the best educators at our university to understand that although there are important points that mark our learning progress, we always have opportunities to learn more.

We always have the opportunity to learn more! We have only to open ourselves to the learning opportunities that roll by in each moment of every day. If we pay attention, we encounter instructions all the time, tuition-free.

Today’s readings provide instruction. Paul tells the Ephesians to stop lying, to tell our neighbors the truth, “for we are members of one another.” He says, “Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil. Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labor and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy. Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the

day of redemption. Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. Therefore, be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”

Wow, that’s a lot of instruction. That’s a lot to learn. Where do we start?
Upon hearing these instructions, what do we do?

I have to admit that sometimes my instinct is to spring instantly into response mode. I try to translate the instructions into outward action in the world. Think of a player piano roll, where each punch translates to a note in the score. Note after note, after note until an entire song is revealed.

This metaphor isn’t wrong, but it feels too simplistic. There’s more complexity to the ways we absorb life’s instructions. Think of it more like a chemistry lab. Each of us is a unique compound, a unique mix of atoms and molecules. And the instructions we encounter are catalysts that can prompt responses ranging from inaction to action.

In this way, we are invited to think about preparing ourselves, attending to our unique mix. “Do I have too much of this? Too little of that?” We are also invited to being available, ready, and open to receive “instructions” as we encounter various catalysts in life. “Is my lid open or closed?”

And then comes the moment when we realize we are not just a unique mixture waiting for a catalyst, an instruction. We also have the potential to become a catalyst, to inform and instruct others in our unique ways.

Consider how our spiritual lives infuse our daily lives. Instructions, like those we read in Paul's letter to the Ephesians, invite us to outward action in the world, this is true. It's also true that such instructions invite us to inward stillness, to open ourselves to the quiet of considering how we become Christian by emptying ourselves, to be filled by the bread of life that Christ offers us. Yet this emptying does not mean that we stop being ourselves; it means we become our **true** selves, the selves meant to co-create our life with God.

It's a both/and: the more we empty ourselves to allow God within, the more we can be filled with God. The more we are filled with God, the more we become capable of fully acting our true Divine purpose. Fulfilling our Divine purpose does not mean sitting back and waiting for destiny. It's a both/and: we act outwardly in the world and we act inwardly within ourselves. This balanced combination allows us to consider our personal spiritual paths while also taking action in the world to stand for justice and love.

On a continual path of learning, I'm not sure I want to say I **am** Christian so much as I want to say I am **a practicing Christian**. I am **becoming Christian**.

During our formation process as a Ministry Development Team, I distinctly remember that John Greve joked that we would know when we were fully baked

as Christians ready to serve when, like a turkey in the oven, the little white plastic ring on the “DONE” indicator would suddenly pop up. We likened this to a clergy collar.

We laughed, realizing we would never be “DONE.” On my spiritual journey, I’m not counting on being “DONE” so much as I’m counting on opportunities to continue learning, continue practicing, continue balancing through a co-creative process with God.

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Jesus says, “I am the bread of life.” Our Eucharistic Prayer is our sacred, weekly practice of allowing ourselves to be filled by this bread of life. This is an important part of practicing to become Christian, an important catalyst for being our best spiritual selves.

Facing a collision course with a world needing us to be our best selves, sometimes it does not feel like enough to practice becoming Christian. It can feel like we need every Christian to be fully baked and actively transforming the world. What are we to do?

A first step is to realize we are not alone.

Jesus offers himself to us as the Bread of Life, a catalyst that, if we’ve mindfully emptied ourselves to receive it, offers the hope of transformation. When we eat

of this bread and drink of this cup together this morning, we engage as a community living in **hope of transformation**.

We **become that transformation** when we carry HOPE and LOVE out of this building into the world. We manifest Christ's HOPE and LOVE when we allow ourselves to serve others mindfully, when we notice someone who needs help; when we join people of all faiths, who practice becoming their best spiritual selves. As Christians, we are not alone. We are joined by those of every faith in the sacred work of transforming humanity.

Many faith traditions hold helpful catalysts that can enrich our lives as Christians. In thinking of how I can prepare myself to receive the Bread of Life from Christ, I am enriched by the words of Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami: "For a person to renovate his subconscious mind, he must be willing to move out for a while, redesign, rebuild, redecorate, then move back in. This is a form of spiritual discipline."

Abandoning the expectation of already BEING Christian means opening ourselves to BECOMING Christian. Be willing to move out for a while to redesign and rebuild. Always learning, always practicing, always in the process of becoming Christian. Abandoning the expectation that we are all alike as Christians means opening ourselves to the richness of difference. Abandoning the expectation that Christians alone bear the world's burdens means opening ourselves to insightful learnings from ALL faiths, united in a vast and multifaceted view of God as infinite,

unfathomable Creator – the Alpha and the Omega. The bread of life, infinitely more than we can imagine.

Let us be a people nourished, forgiven, healed, and renewed that we might go out into the world in hope, joy, and love.

Amen.