

Sermon – St. Paul’s Cathedral, San Diego, Ca. – August 23, 2009
ABIDE IN ME by Richard Lief
Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18
Ephesians 6:10-20
John 6:56-69

I want to recite Thomas Merton’s well-known prayer:

**My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going.
I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain
where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that
I think I am following You will does not mean that I am
actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please You
does in fact please You. And I hope I have that desire in all that
I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that
desire. And I know that, if I do this, You will lead me by the
right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore I
will trust You always though I may seem to be lost and in the
shadow of death. I will not fear, for You are ever with me, and
You will never leave me to face my perils alone.**

Carolyn’s father was born in Japan to missionary parents almost a century ago. Therefore, we anticipated our trip to the Land of the Rising Sun for a number of years. Last October was the time to go.

We signed up with Elderhostel, made sure our passports were up-to-date, cashed in our air miles, packed our bags, and boarded our plane even though the world-wide financial meltdown was in its beginning stages. What were we doing going on this trip when everything seemed to have the potential for falling apart?

We arrived at our hotel in Kyoto at night and went right to our room to recover from the twelve plus hour transpacific flight. The next morning we went down to breakfast and met a number of people on the Elderhostel tour. One of our companions was reading a newspaper written in English and reported to us that his bank had failed. We discovered it was our bank. too!

Yes, it was a shock! Hope that FDIC kicks in quickly, we said! Later in the day we heard how 401ks were dropping in value. What were we doing half way round the world with everything going to hell in a handbasket?

After absorbing these shocks, we knew that we really couldn’t do anything about it. Our good friend and financial advisor was watching over things, and we knew if we called him, he’d be sure to tell us: “Hang in there, things go up and down.” Easy for him to say!

Well, we just had to let it go and trust in God’s abiding love. This was a trip of a life-time and we weren’t going to blow it. Maybe it would be our last trip, but we were going to enjoy it. As we let go, something came over me. I experienced a freedom to simply to be. And extraordinarily, I experienced a further freedom of generosity. I wanted to give more to whatever needed giving to.

It is not always easy to let go and trust, to be in the moment, to enjoy the moment, to give of one's self – especially when things seem to be falling apart or unexpected challenges come our way. Life is like that.

We can imagine how Peter, the other disciples, and the crowds which followed Jesus were challenged when Jesus started to carry on about eating his flesh and drinking his blood. Jesus said, "... whoever eats me will live because of me." This was not within his followers' religious understanding. Everyone knew that before you ate an animal you drained it of its blood. You didn't drink the blood because blood represented the life of God, and that if you drank it you were assuming that you were God. That's blasphemy!

But then again, Jesus frequently said and did things that were way beyond what the disciples understood. This time he seemed to go too far. The disciples started to complain: "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?"

So Jesus asked the twelve, "Do you wish to go away?" Simon Peter answered him, "Lord to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God." We can imagine Peter saying to Jesus, "I have followed you thus far, what am I to do? I'll keep trying to understand what this is all about. Once again I'll step out and try to trust you."

And it is as if Jesus responded by saying: "Let me take you by the hand and lead you. Accept my love and trust that where I will bring you, the deepest desires of your heart will be fulfilled."

The forums and sermons shared this month at the Cathedral have been rich fare. Our focus has been on the sixth chapter of the Gospel according to John which continues to inspire and challenge me as we break open together the remarkable feast of understanding provided by this late first century evangelist.

In his first chapter John tells us that "In the beginning was the Word ...and the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us. If want to know God, see Jesus. Then in the sixth chapter we hear these words about Jesus being the bread of life. Bread is the substance of life. And so he says, "eat me, consume me and you will have real life."

If you want to have real life, eat me, become me – and become me as part of a beloved community – and together be my body – the Body of Christ. Each Sunday we come to the communion table and consume Jesus' Body and Blood, and together we become again and again the Body of Christ.

William Temple, the mid-twentieth century Archbishop of Canterbury, says that eating the bread at the communion table means receiving the power of self-giving and self-sacrifice - and that drinking the blood of Christ means receiving the life that is triumphant over death.

He says further that "it is not the momentary eating, but the permanent **abiding** that is of primary importance...communion is found in **abiding** in the Son as the Son **abides** in the Father."

What comes through to me as key to the sixth chapter of John is this sense of abiding. Jesus says, "Abide in me, as I in you, just as I abide in the Father... and you will have life." Abiding – a word that connotes continuity and communion – an assurance that we will not be cast out into the void. As the writer of Psalm 34 reminded us a few minutes ago in verse

eighteen: "The Lord is near to the broken-hearted, and will save those whose spirits are crushed." The Lord abides with us and in us.

Coming up in the last week of April of next year, the Cathedral Center for the Performing and Visual Arts will produce the American drama classic, *To Kill A Mockingbird*, here in the Cathedral chancel. The audience will also be seated in the chancel so they can easily hear and have good sight-lines.

Mockingbird is a powerful and touching Pulitzer Prize winning play which captures the truth of a small Southern town in the midst of the Great Depression. The story is about abiding with one another.

It centers around a thoughtful and wise lawyer named Atticus Finch and his precocious six-year old daughter Jean Louise Finch, otherwise known as Scout. Scout calls her father, Atticus. In addition to Atticus and Scout, there is a local farmer, named Walter Cunningham, who plays a pivotal role in the drama.

Atticus, who is white, is defending a black man who has been wrongly accused of raping a young white woman. The defendant is being held in the town's small jail awaiting trial the next day. Atticus, sensing the volatility of the situation, decides to take a chair, some reading material, and a floor lamp with an extension cord, and stand guard in front of the jail the night before the trial.

Volatility arrives in the form of four car-loads of angry white farmers who demand that the prisoner be released to them. Of course, Atticus tries to talk them out of it. Scout and her brother, and a young friend, appear on the scene out of curiosity. They run up the stairs to the jail porch and stand beside Atticus.

And it is Scout who saves the day with a profound innocence and wisdom amidst the possibility of vigilante violence.

She recognizes Walter Cunningham in the midst of the farmers. He has been paying Atticus for legal fees through the barter system by generously providing the Finch family with stovewood, hickory nuts, and at Christmas time, he brought them some holly. The barter system has been enabling Cunningham keep up the mortgage payments on his farm.

Scout calls out, "Hey, Mr. Cunningham, how's your farm getting along?" "Don't you remember me, Mr. Cunningham?" "I'm Jean Louise Finch. You brought us some hickory nuts one time, remember?" "I go to school with Walter." "He's your boy, ain't he? Ain't he, sir?"

"He's in my grade...and he does right well. He's a good boy ... a real nice boy. We brought him home for dinner one time. Maybe he told you about me. I beat him up one time but he was real nice about it. Tell him *hey* for me, won't you?"

Mr. Cunningham is described as being moved to a faint nod. He did know Scout, after all. He displays no interest in his son. So Scout tries to return to sympathizing with him about the difficulties of keeping his farm going. This was meant as a last ditch effort to make him feel at home.

In essence, Scout says "Atticus told me that keeping a farm going nowadays is not easy." As she is advising him, she realizes that in fact she is addressing the entire aggregation.

Their attention amounts to fascination. All the men are looking at Scout, and some with their mouths half open.

Scout begins to feel sweat gathering at the edges of her hair – she could stand anything except a bunch of people looking at her. They were quite still.

“What’s the matter?” asks Scout. Mr. Cunningham’s face showed no emotion. But, then he does a peculiar thing. He squats down and takes Scout by both shoulders. He says, “I’ll tell him you said *hey*, little lady.”

Then he straightens up and waves a big hand. “Let’s clear out,” he calls. “Let’s get going, boys.” And they do.

In a small Southern town in the midst of the Great Depression people had to be reminded that they had to hang together. They had to abide in one another, even though the circumstances challenged their basic sensibilities of how life should lived.

Mr. Cunningham was reminded by a wise young girl that he was more than the leader of a lynch mob. He was a struggling farmer who paid his debts the best he could, and was the caring father of his son. That there was something deeper to life than being the leader of a group of riled-up vigilantes. His home was in that town and among these people. This was his abode. He abided with them. They were inter-twined. I in you and you in me.

For me, Scout is the Christ-figure in this scene. She offers another way of dealing with difficult situations which is beyond passivity, and beyond violence. To me, she shows us what it means to abide in Jesus, the Bread of Life - what it means to ingest Jesus’ life, and become Christ himself.

I see the potential lynch mob returning to their senses, becoming an abiding community –at least in that moment. I would say for that moment they were the Body of Christ by responding to a little girl who reminded them who they were.

In the same way, you and I are called to feed upon Christ, to be Christ, the Bread of Life. In receiving him, he becomes our very life. As St. Paul says, “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives within me.”

With open hearts, then, we can imagine Jesus calling us each by name - Scout, Mr. Cunningham, Richard, each one of us – and if we listen carefully, we will hear him saying to us:

Let me take you by the hand and lead you.
Accept my love and trust that where I will
bring you, the deepest desires of your heart
will be fulfilled! Abide in me. Be me.