

In our Gospel reading this morning, we have heard the third in the series of a total of five readings from the Bread of Life discourse in John. And whereas last week's reading was very much a dialogue between Jesus and the throngs that have been following him, the bulk of this week's reading is a monologue in response to the people's grumblings. People are complaining that Jesus isn't giving them the miraculous signs they think they need to see. Paul seems to be talking in the Epistle to the Ephesians to a similar group of people: they are bickering with each other, lying to each other, and complaining to God. And yet, they know Jesus can help.

Or do they? They essentially say, "Hey, we know your parents – Mary and Joseph. How can you say you came down from heaven?" What's rather amusing about this of course is that these are the same people who have been following Jesus all over the place so they can hear everything he is going to say or do. They're STRONGLY attracted to him; they're DRAWN to him; yet they complain and are confused and it's clear that they don't understand what he's talking about. Maybe a few of us can relate to that.

What's even more ironic about this of course is that people are complaining and essentially asking to see more miracles, when the greatest miracle of all is right in front of them—God, in flesh. But this particular miracle, oddly enough, can be hard to digest. It is compelling, but it is deeply mysterious. If it were neither of those things, I suspect we wouldn't be here. But I also suspect that it is a difficult reality to digest because it speaks to us of Love, and Love is not always easy – to accept, or to express.

So Jesus responds to their confusion by telling them, "No one can come to me unless *drawn* by the Father who sent me... Everyone who has *heard and learned* from the Father comes to me."

Inscrutable though this too sounds, Jesus is offering us something important here in the use of two words: Heard and Learned. Jesus makes a distinction. Hearing and learning are not necessarily the same thing. Just because I can go to school and hear everything the teacher says doesn't mean I've learned it. Even if I can regurgitate it on a test, it doesn't mean I've internalized it. These people have heard it, for sure; but they haven't yet learned it.

Jesus is saying: PEOPLE. I am right here. I'm talking and you might be hearing me but you are not really listening; you are not learning. You aren't getting it yet because if you were, you wouldn't be asking me for signs!

John Branson talked to us last week about feasting on the word, about eating the book; it's the idea of practicing the language of faith so much that it becomes written on our hearts. Listening to scripture and not just hearing it, but really learning and internalizing it. And if we do this, then we begin to experience the personal transformation that is described by Paul in our Epistle today.

But how do we do this? How do we hear AND learn? Practice. We are really used to Jesus. Just like the people who had known Jesus since he was small, for most of us he isn't a new radical presence in our lives either. The knowledge of his existence is something we grew up with, so it can be hard to take a step closer and recon with what an incredible reality he is. It is hard to take what we hear and actually act on it. But unless we do, we never really get it. "*God is love and I too am called to live in that love.*" That's nice, BUT HOW?

Paul provides us with a few suggestions: Don't lie. Don't steal. Be angry, but not for forever and don't act on it in ways that hurt people. This short excerpt is not so much rules for living as it is how to love. Love, as I said, is not always easy. If this is love in action, we can understand why it is tempting to want something else, like a great sign.

A number of people have asked me since coming here about Church School, about getting their children involved, and about my own teaching philosophy. And often they ask – if my child can't be there every week is

that ok – and I say “Of course. Most of the lessons stand on their own and so if you miss a week here and there it’s no big deal. By the same token, if someone joins in the middle of the school year, that’s no big deal either, we’re just happy to have them there.” However, I always point out that whereas the lessons are “stand-alone”, the effect, the likely-hood of the stories of our faith being really internalized, takes some time. Because in the end, what happens in Church School is not about learning stories to know and repeat (whether it’s about Mary and Martha or the Feeding of 5000), it’s about understanding, really knowing, what they mean about our relationship with God. And that means hearing it, and practicing it, and ultimately, learning it. Lucky for you, the practicing part means service projects and some of you will get to come.

At the end of the day, what’s most important, whether we are talking about the tiniest church schooler, or the eldest members of our congregation, is not simply that we can repeat a bible story, or – like the throngs following Jesus in today’s Gospel – say back to him what he’s said to us – but rather that we hear stories of what God’s Love looks like, and we practice it, and we learn it.

There will come a time in most of our lives, and for many of us these times have already happened and will happen again, whether we are 16 or 66, where we get a phone call; an e-mail; a note from school; or someone sits us down and says, “There’s something important I need to talk to you about”, and there is heart wrenching news to be heard: someone is sick or has died or is in the hospital or perhaps a relationship is ending. Moments like these can send the best of us into a tail spin; a tail spin that often includes thoughts of either a finger-pointing vindictive God, or an absent and remote God who must not care, and we are back to wanting a sign. And those feelings are real. And that grief is real. But my hope for all of us is even if we have to struggle through those initial real and grief filled thoughts, we come back to what we know to be true: that God is love and that Love is real. So when we sit in a hospital next to an ailing loved one, or receiving radiation, we look to the empty seat in the room and we know it is not so empty; Jesus is there, the bread of life who sustains us all, waiting with us, and loving us.

Folks, ultimately, the reason we are here is to see for OURSELVES, and to help others see, that Love surrounds us, that we can live it out, that we can learn it, that we can forgive when we’d rather hold a grudge, that we can tell the truth when it would be easier not to. And that LOVE is – like bread, so ordinary, and like God, so extraordinary.