

Déjà Vu All Over Again

Time after Pentecost – Lectionary 20
The Reverend Nancy R. Easton

Sunday, August 16, 2009
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Proverbs 9:1-6; Ephesians 5:15-20; John 6:51-58

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Repetition is a useful thing. If you want to remember something—a name, perhaps, or a number—memory gurus say you are to repeat it several times, write it down several times after that, then visualize the name or number in your mind. I tell folks here that if I greet you at the door three weeks in a row, I'll probably remember your name from that point on. That's not always the case—I do sometimes develop a mental block for some reason—but most of the time, the repetition of seeing you and speaking with you helps me recall your name. For those of you who have to endure my mental block, just trust that I'm working on it!

Sometimes we repeat things so **we** remember. And sometimes we repeat things so **others** remember. My family calls that “nagging” but I prefer to call it “helpful repetition.” Certainly when the children were younger, that was necessary. (Now that they're older, repetition is even more necessary.)

We have been the recipients of repetition these last several weeks in our Gospel lesson. For, beginning on July 26, and continuing through next weekend, we have various portions of the 6th Chapter of John's Gospel as our appointed scripture. The lessons cover parts of a long discourse Jesus has, first with the crowds whom he has fed in a miraculous way, but also with his disciples who witness that miracle, and with those who begin to dispute what Jesus says. I'll take you back to July 26. That's where Jesus takes five barley loaves and two fish, such a small amount of food, really, and feeds the crowds coming to him, numbered at 5,000. He feeds them to their fill, and when they come back the next day for more food, Jesus begins to preach to them about real bread. He tells them they ought to seek bread that lasts, that endures longer than the meal they had the day before. The crowds are confused. They misunderstand Jesus, so he speaks again to them, but more definitively. Jesus tells them that **he** is the **true** bread from heaven, that he is the Bread of Life, that he is the food they ought to be seeking. Then the crowds begin to get downright hostile. They question Jesus' words, complain about him—just who does he think he is? So Jesus has to repeat and further explicate his previous teachings. By today's lesson, the people are now **arguing** among themselves about what Jesus is saying. He is compelled to clarify once more what he's been saying all along. Come next week, you'll find Jesus still teaching, because now his disciples will get into the act, misunderstanding as much as anyone else, and Jesus will need to explain things even to his closest friends.

Now, did I say repetition is helpful? Apparently, not always. Although Jesus seems more than willing to explain and re-explain his words, folks still don't seem to understand. In fact, their animosity and skepticism grow the more Jesus speaks. Jesus himself seems increasingly frustrated that no matter how he explains himself, or how often, the people just don't get it.

What will it take for them to believe in him? Trust in him? Follow him? In this case, all the repetition in the world doesn't seem to make a difference.

OK, so maybe repetition **doesn't** work all the time. Case in point—I recall now that, during those high school years I took Home Economics, when Mrs. Keller was teaching us sewing, I had one of those mental blocks I was talking about. Every Wednesday morning I'd go into that room full of sewing machines, and every Wednesday morning, I'd ask Mrs. Keller the same question: “Mrs. Keller, how do you thread a bobbin?” The directions on the inside of the sewing machine didn't make sense to me. Mrs. Keller was infinitely patient with me...for the first month or so...but I could sense her growing frustration as she'd teach and re-teach the intricacies of the simple act of threading a bobbin. It wasn't like she didn't try to teach me. I just never got it.

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...Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. That teaching is the germ of all our Lord Jesus has been saying these past weeks. But the people coming to Jesus and hearing him speak these words did not “get it,” and could not bring themselves to believe these words, or believe in him. In truth, this repetition wasn't so much boring as it was increasingly confusing, graphic, and scandalous. Jesus started using a word we translate as “eat” but which should really be translated as “gnaw” or “chew”—the kind of noisy, voracious eating we do when we are very, very hungry. Jesus spoke with increasing specificity about the need to ingest **his** flesh and **his** blood, which only brought to mind repugnant images of cannibalism and the drinking of blood—acts clearly forbidden by Jewish Law and considered utterly deviant. The repetition obviously wasn't helping, and maybe actually was hurting Jesus' cause. Either the people were stupid, stubborn, or we just have to admit Jesus wasn't doing a very good job of explaining what was nearly unexplainable. (And what the Church still struggles to explain.): That our God gives himself to us, and the only way to do that is in the flesh—the stuff we're made of—and that's the person of Jesus. That Jesus sacrifices himself for us on the cross—in the flesh—in order to draw us out of our sin, our darkness, and the countless tragic ways we die a little every day. That Jesus was really raised from the dead—in the flesh—so that you and I might enter into a new life with him that begins now and continues on into forever. That our eating and drinking a simple meal here will be one way—not the only way, but certainly one primary way—that Jesus, having given himself up in the flesh for our sake, can now be with us, fill us, abide in us, and live for the world through us.

Only how many times does Jesus have to say that to us until we believe it, and him? And then trust him? And follow him? When will we get it? Surely John, our Gospel-writer, with all this repetition that he records, wants us to know Jesus plans on reminding us until the cows come home. Or, until we come home to him. Or, until he can make his home with us. Repetition can be a useful thing, you know.

But it takes more than repeating the same words over and over to bring about faith. After all, the more Jesus preached to the crowds, the greater their confusion. Only **after** Jesus was crucified, **after** he suffered and died and was placed in that tomb, and **after** he was raised to new life, did some people begin to get it. It took his action of self-giving, not only his words **about** self-

giving, before some people began to believe. And then at last the words themselves began to make sense to the people.

Steven Covey tells the story of a young man whose heart was broken by his first love, who had ditched him for a mutual friend. The 17-year-old was devastated. He had no idea which way to turn, and whether life held any worth anymore. The thought of heading back to school the next morning nearly drove him crazy. That evening he lay on his bed, the door closed behind him, and he wept—huge sobs of hurt. After awhile, his father entered the room, standing quietly by the bed. He didn't say a word. He didn't say, "You're young. You'll get over her. There's plenty of fish in the sea." Instead, he gently pulled back the covers of the bed, climbed in beside his son, wrapped his arms around his grown boy, and held him close. That father pressed his face against the side of his son's face, and his son could feel his father's own tears coursing down his cheek. The father said nothing. He just wept. He wept because he loved his son. He wept because his son was in pain. In time, the young man's own sobs subsided. His father got up, tucked the blankets around his boy, and only then did he say words, quietly but firmly: "My son, I promise the sun will come out again. I love you." Then he left as quietly as he had entered.

Do you suppose, right then, that young man began to believe what only hours earlier would have seemed unbelievable? Do you suppose, right then, that young man began to believe his father's words that somehow life would go on and life would be good? Do you suppose, right then, that young man knew, deep down to the core of his being, that he was loved by someone?

See, faith isn't some head thing, some intellectual pursuit that if we say the right words often enough, speak in just the right terms, people come to believe. Oh, certainly faith can be nurtured through regular reading and devotions, strong sermons and educational curricula. But mostly faith grows as the people of God experience the self-giving love of God in their lives. That's exactly what God is doing in the person of Jesus, our truest friend.

And you and I experience this love of a self-giving God every single time we receive our Lord's Supper. It is not only bread and wine, but it is Jesus Christ, pressing his face against ours, his tears mingling with ours, his heart breaking with ours. He comes to us here when we are at our neediest, our hungriest, our ugliest, our loneliest. He comes to us here when we walk in dark valleys. He comes to us here when we aren't certain which way to turn. He comes to us even as we have hesitated coming to him. And then, when he is here with us so fully, he repeats his truth that the sun will come out again, that life is worth living, that all is forgiven, that a future with him is before us, and that he loves us.

Is this what it takes for us to believe in Jesus Christ? Trust in him? Follow him? All I know is he will continue to invite us here, **repeating** that invitation, **repeating** that truth, until, at last, we do. **AMEN.**

Copyright © 2009, Nancy R. Easton. All rights reserved.