

The Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd

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Proper 14; John 6:35, 41-51

Let us pray. Come Holy Spirit and kindle in our hearts the fire of your love.

With summer kicking into high gear now and the weather finally starting to really heat up, I've been thinking about Texas summers. I lived in Central Texas for just over 20 years, so I became something of an expert when it came to heat. And yet it seemed that every year I was surprised by the ferocity of the Central Texas summer. One particularly memorable summer, we suffered a record 42 consecutive days with temperatures over 100 degrees – and, of course, no rain.

But it's not just the high temperatures that make summer difficult, it is also the relentless brightness and weight of the harsh sun, and at some point each summer I found myself longing for escape. One of the cooler things to do there when the heat becomes oppressive is to go caving. With all the limestone we have in this part of Texas, there are an impressive number of caverns. No matter how bright and hot it is outside, it is always cool and dark deep in the caverns.

Limestone caves are natural cavities formed underneath the ground. Over millions of years, acidic groundwater or underground rivers dissolve away this soft and porous stone, leaving cavities which grow over time. While plants do not grow directly into the cave, the plants on the surface around the cave play an important role in their formation. The vegetation litter from the plants on the surface provides the carbon dioxide which creates the carbonic acid that helps erode the limestone. Also, growing roots release acids and other compounds that help them break through the rock to grow, which can then help these breaks open further and create new caves.

In the Limpopo Province of South Africa, near the country's northwest border with Mozambique, are some of the oldest limestone caves in the world. The Echo Caves is one system in this area and was discovered by a farmer in 1923 when he was searching for his cattle that had mysteriously disappeared – presumably into the caves! This system of caves is huge – it is thought that the caves may stretch for over 25 miles, but nobody knows their full extent. They are called Echo Caves because the local people used one of the stalactites as a drum to warn of an approaching threat. Given the breadth of this cave system, the sound travelled for surprisingly long distances and the people could take refuge in the caves.

These caves are also home to a truly remarkable ecosystem. One of the more amazing species found there is the wild fig tree and what makes these trees so special are their roots. Researchers have followed the roots of these trees deep into Echo Caves and determine them to be around 400 feet deep — the deepest known root system in the world. These trees have survived and thrived in an arid and hostile climate by developing an unparalleled root system to find and tap into the life-giving water found deep within the rocky soil. And, in turn, these trees provide fruit to eat and a large canopy that provides much-needed shade.

In his Letter to the Ephesians, the apostle Paul makes the bold theological claim that it is the worldwide Church that has now become the Body of Christ, of which Christ is the head and within which all are united. This Body is rooted in God's saving love, shown in Jesus Christ, from which the body's very life is sourced. As we abide in Christ's Body, Christ also abides in

us, and through this the eternal waters of God's love flows through our very lives. To the church in Ephesus, Paul writes, "I pray that... Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being **rooted and grounded in love.**" (Ephesians 3:17)

Let us use the lens of this prayer to now look at our lesson today from the Gospel of John. In a Gospel that at times appears cagey, evasive, and indirect, this morning we have one of the moments when Jesus pulls back the veil and declares unequivocally, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." This is an audacious and direct assertion of who he is and from whom he came. It shouldn't be surprising that some of his hearers struggled with this – after all, Jesus is not only claiming himself to be greater than Moses but that his very presence provides better nourishment than the manna from heaven that sustained the Israelites in the desert for 40 years. "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." (John 6:52)

For John's Jesus, this promised everlasting life happens when one "abides in him as he abides in the Father." When we abide in Christ, when we root ourselves in Christ and source our lives there, we find ourselves nourished by God in such a way that we will never again be hungry or thirsty, for the **roots of this life are deep and strong.**

Life rooted and grounded in Christ means a life rooted in love. The greatest truth about God, as revealed in the life and teachings of Jesus, is that "God is love." (1 John 4:8) Jesus not only claims God's love to be true but also claims that God's love is the source of eternal life. Paradoxically, of course, this love-shaped life looks like the cross. It is a paradox because the way of the cross isn't really a way of death, rather it is the way of truly living – rooting ourselves in the deep streams of eternal life – the everlasting life that may be lived here and now. Paul points to this in our lesson today when he exhorts his followers in Ephesus, and us, to "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." (Ephesians 5:2)

When we cross ourselves we are asking God to make our lives cruciform-shaped. We ask that as we live into our baptismal identity, abiding ever more fully in the love that is God, that we be formed and live a life shaped by this love. This love-shaped life begins in baptism. Through the waters of baptism, we are born anew into a life lived in communion with God and each other. We are anointed and claim that we are "sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ's own forever." And as such, Christ dwells within us as we are rooted and grounded in God's love. Through our baptism, we become a part of a much larger family – we become members of the Body of Christ and we begin to live a life sourced in God. Over time, our roots will grow deeper and deeper in order to draw from the deep wellsprings of God's love – the eternal waters of which Jesus speaks. As this love shapes our lives and our heart, we will increasingly embody God's love into the world, living and loving others as Christ loves us. We become signposts whose very lives signify God's presence and love. What could be more life-giving than that?

I often think that we get tripped up on all this talk of "eternal life" talk in our scriptures. Smarter theologians than me over the millennia understand Jesus to be referring to the promised resurrection at the end of time when God's kingdom reigns and God is all in all. But this can't only refer to a distant future state because Jesus also speaks of this kingdom as already in-breaking now, here, today. My favorite theologian, Frederick Buechner, eloquently and succinctly writes of eternal life in this way, "We think of eternal life, if we think of it at all, as what happens when life ends. We would do better to think of it as what happens when life

begins... In other words, to live eternal life in the full and final sense is to be with God as Christ is with him, and with each other as Christ is with us.”¹

Eternal life is what happens when we *root our lives deeply in God’s love*. Eternal life is what happens when we faithfully live in community, recognizing that we are not fully human without each other. Eternal life is what happens when we abide in Christ as he abides in the Father and he in us. Eternal life is what happens when we live, love, and serve as Christ’s body in the world.

Amen.

¹ Beuchner, Frederick; <http://www.frederickbuechner.com/quote-of-the-day/2016/10/14/eternal-life?rq=eternal%20life>