

*Lord, to whom can we go?*

Do you remember that great scene in *An Officer and a Gentleman*? Zach Mayo is a guy who has burned a lot of bridges. He finds himself at the end of the line: flight school for the U.S. Navy is his last option. A tough gunnery sergeant (played by Louis Gossett, Jr.) stands in his way; at least that is how he sees it. Mayo is used to short-cuts and finding the easy way through things and the sergeant sees through all of that and isn't going to let that happen this time around...

So there is a scene in that film when the sergeant is pushing him beyond his limits and has him doing pushups in the mud. He taunts and ridicules him and calls him names. "Why don't you just quit, Mayo-naise?" he asks? And if you've seen the film you undoubtedly recall the response, a poignant moment when the con-artist gets real: "*I got no place else to go.*"

I can't help it! I know that Peter spoke the words in the sixth chapter of John's Gospel long before that film was made. But every time I read of this encounter between Jesus and Peter in the sixth chapter of John, in my mind's eye I see Louis Gossett, Jr. playing Jesus and Richard Gere's Peter doing push-ups in the mud as Jesus asks him if he wants to just call this whole discipleship-thing quits and go home. *I got no place else to go*, Peter says. To whom can we go?

There have been moments in my ministry when I have felt that way. Most days, Holden is a pretty good gig for a priest. Just ask some of my colleagues who serve in dying mill towns or among people not just *resistant* to change but willing to do whatever it takes to hold onto a past that in truth never really even existed. Ask the wardens and vestry who show up for Wardens and Vestry Day with lay leaders from across the diocese; time and again they come back and say, "you know, things are pretty good around here compared to what so many parishes in our diocese are struggling with." And that's very true.

But there have still been moments in my ministry, even here, when I have felt like I'm doing push-ups in the mud, in the rain (I get to about three). And there is a drill sergeant above me (usually the sergeant looks a lot like Robin Carlo, a former warden who has never cut me any slack) and I am feeling like ministry is hard, and I'm tired and maybe not equipped for it all and exhausted and in need of a sabbatical. And I find myself saying it too: "I've got no place else to go."

There comes a point of no return, I think: a point in life, in marriage, and in our vocational choices. I don't mean to make that sound like we are "trapped"—sometimes people may feel that way but I don't think that's what Peter is saying in this gospel and it's not what I'm trying to say either. The point is that you not only get through the challenges, but in hindsight you are able to see that it is the challenges that make it all real. They are defining moments.

In the case of Zach Mayo it is that moment in the mud that represents a key turning point toward becoming an officer and a gentleman. In the case of you and me as followers of Jesus Christ, it is those challenges and even obstacles that form us into more faithful Christians. There will always be good days and bad days, ups and downs—because that is life. But the insight that comes to Peter in the sixth chapter of John's Gospel is that he is meant to be where he is. There is no turning back; he can't go back home because for him, home is now with Jesus. Jesus has the

words of eternal life. Peter has come to believe that and to know that Jesus is the holy one of God. There is no more running away; he's finally found what he's been looking for. That doesn't mean there won't still be ups and downs but he's realized that he's got no place else to go because even tough days with Jesus are better than good days without him.

*Ultimately this is about relationships.* And I think this is really what the sixth chapter of John's Gospel is all about. We've spent the past five weeks reflecting on John's Eucharistic theology to see what Word of the Lord might be here for us as we seek to be the Church in this time and place. At times it may have felt like "heady" stuff. But ultimately the challenge in this chapter, I think, is to see that it is first and foremost a matter of the heart and only secondarily of the head. We experience the living and risen Christ through bread and wine. Whatever else we say about the meaning of the Eucharist is a reflection on the practice of eating and drinking at the same Table together, week after week.

When Jesus says that "those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them," he is talking about community. To encounter God's holiness in and through Jesus is to be claimed and marked and sealed as Christ's own. To abide in Jesus—to eat the bread and drink the cup that incorporates us into his resurrected life and makes us members of each other—that is something.

There are people out there (both ordained and lay) and perhaps some part of all of us who are always in search of the "perfect" congregation. In fact, that is a form of narcissism. They have a list of what they expect and they go down that list and grade a congregation to assess whether or not it meets their stated needs. Now let me be careful here and as clear as I can be. First of all, I am a person who has changed denominations. I was even ordained in the United Methodist Church, but ultimately left to come to the Episcopal Church. I did that not because there was anything wrong with the Methodist Church or because I thought the Episcopal Church had all the answers, but because the denomination that fed and nurtured my parents wasn't ultimately the place that I needed to nurture my own adult faith.

And even before that change, when Graham was just a baby and I was working as a campus minister in New Britain, Connecticut and Hathy and I were these two young twenty-somethings in search of a parish home—let me tell you it was not easy. And we went "church shopping"—although I don't like that term. We were trying to find our way home, trying to find a congregation to both welcome and challenge us. And that was hard and it took us a long time. And we did have criteria to help us in that search—certain things we hoped for. So I'm not saying that we need to stay in the denomination our parents chose for us; Lord knows this congregation would be about 2/3 smaller than it is if people did that! Nor should anyone stay too long in a congregation that is sick and unhealthy. And even good thriving congregations may not be the right fit for us.

But what I am trying to say is that there are people who are constantly in search of the "perfect" congregation and they flit from one place to the next in search of a place that will meet their own expectations; and very often I have found that the problem in that case is not with the congregations but with them. Wherever you go you have to take yourself along. What I am trying to say is that it is a sign of health to put down some roots in one place, to work at

developing and cultivating relationships even with those who see things differently from the way we do. *Especially with those who see things differently.* There is health in becoming part of the solution rather than constantly diagnosing the problems. That is in fact what ministry is all about—not just the ministry of the ordained but the ministry of all of God’s people.

*Every congregation is made up of imperfect people.* Some days the music ministers will not hit the ball out of the park. Some days the sermon will be just plain boring. Some days the ushers will be distracted and forget to welcome a newcomer. Some days the lay reader will stumble over your name as they offer the prayers. Some days things just don’t click. But over time we find, by the grace of God, a place to call home. And when we do, then even on those tough days we know that home is far from perfect, we know that we are where we are meant to be. *We’ve got no place else to go...*

You may think that I’ve diverted from this theme of what it means to say that Jesus is the Bread of Life, this theme we’ve been exploring for the past five weeks. But in fact I think what I’m trying to say goes to the very heart of what it means to call Jesus the Bread of Life. Because I think it’s where the rubber meets the road. It is where we get not only to the very heart of the sixth chapter of John but to the heart of John’s entire Gospel. *The Word has become flesh.* That is to say this: Jesus isn’t an abstract idea. He isn’t a doctrine to be believed, but a person to be loved; he is, as Peter claims in today’s reading, “the holy one of God.” Once we see that we begin to also see that we truly do abide in him, and he in us. That’s not abstract metaphysical language but goes to the heart of the meaning of the Incarnation. Jesus takes on real flesh; and when we come week after week to be fed by Christ himself and to receive the Bread of Life and the Cup of Salvation we are nourished and strengthened and called to grow a little bit more into the full stature of Christ, to become what we eat.

Some days we are tuned into that reality and our eyes are open and we behold the holy one of God in the bread, in the wine, in the music or the liturgy or the sermon or our neighbor. Other days we are distracted by any of the countless distractions that can draw our attention away from the love of God. Some days church just feels like a habit. But we continue to come and to be fed and even in just showing up we receive sustenance for the journey. And over time we begin to see it a little more clearly: we abide in Christ and Christ abides in not just us personally but among us as a community. We see things through a different set of lenses. The challenges are still there: the hymn may be impossible to sing, the sermon may still be boring, the lay reader may still mispronounce several names.

But we’ve got no place else to go, because we are home. We are where we belong, and there is good news in recognizing that. *I am the bread of life, Jesus says. All who come to me shall not hunger and they who believe in me shall not thirst.*