Twenty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle B

St. Mary’s in Riverside, 2021

I’m not sure anyone looks forward to having a grimacing mechanic

Say to us, as our car is going up on the rack at the garage,

“never seen a car that needs such serious repairs,”

or your contractor shaking his head, pulling out his calculator

and noting that this renovation is really going to be expensive,

nor do we want our surgeon to tell us that

the procedure we about to undergo will be one for the textbooks.

In that same vein, you probably don’t want to hear a preacher say

these are some of the toughest readings

I have had to preach on in a long time.

Unfortunately that was my honest assessment

as studied and prayed these readings this past week.

The reading from Joshua is the easiest,

chosen to resonate with the gospel

And offering a quite positive response of people

When it comes to following the Lord.

The second reading is a gendered powder keg:

there’s a longer and shorter version.

It’s the longer one that starts out about wives being

subordinate to their husbands that has

“danger” and “don’t you dare go there” written all over it.

I know biblical scholarship shows Paul was actually progressive

in the face of his patriarchal culture

demanding that both wives and husbands honor each other.

But to 21st century North American ears

it sounds like a return to pre-suffragette days

so I tend to navigate around this Ephesians passage

when it looms on the lectionary landscape.

However, if I thought I was going to find refuge in today’s gospel

these final verses of John six offered a rude surprise.

We have been reading the 6th chapter of John now

for a month of Sundays

even though we are in Cycle B focused on Mark’s gospel.

Back on July 25th the lectionary suddenly switched to John

and we have been reading sections of this long 6th chapter

for multiple Sundays in a row.

Since we are at the end of this journey into John’s gospel

A little recap might be in order.

Chapter six begins as a narrative of compassion:

Jesus’ heart went out to all who had been following him

so Jesus performed a miracle of the heart

feeding the 5000 with a few loaves and fishes.

After feeding his followers literally

Jesus begins nourishing their minds and hearts

by revealing himself as the bread of life.

However, three weeks ago and about 40 verses into John 6

things start to get ugly as the crowd murmurs

that they know his family, they know where he comes from

and it isn’t from heaven.

Then like a rambunctious school board meeting on COVID 19

things rapidly go south

as Jesus not only identifies himself as “bread”

but as “flesh” ... a God with skin on,

a God not only responsive to human need

but a God now become fully human,

whose incarnation is now maybe too close for comfort.

All the flesh talk really gets the crowd going

like a first century congressional shout down

Or one of those pseudo-news talk shows

In which disagreement quickly devolves into insults.

Much of the crowd thinks he’s crazy

But Jesus stands his ground, insisting that

unless they eat his flesh and drink his blood,

they will not have life.

So here we are, the last Sunday of John

episode five of this gospel cliff hanger

but instead of a happy resolution, congressional compromise or some other metaphorical handshake across the aisle,

the Son of God basically gets booed by his own supporters.

Even hand-picked disciples found his words difficult.

Not only were some unwilling to accept them

but in a stunning reversal and even personal rebuke

John writes that “many of his disciples returned to

their former way and no longer accompanied him.”

Yes, there are a few hardcore adherents who stay

but one wonders whether this is a gospel for the remnant

an announcement of beliefs to be embraced

only by the few instead of good news for the masses.

The British writer and lay theologian, G.K. Chesterton

Is popularly known for his fictional priest-detective Fr. Brown.

Featured in multiple films and TV series

Chesterton was baptized as an infant,

but fell away from the Church.

He was led back to the Church of England by his wife

and eventually entered the Catholic Church in 1922.

While living his Christian commitment with great zeal

Chesterton was also constantly reminded of its challenges.

This awareness is well summarized in his famous comment that

“The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting.

It has been found difficult and left untried.”[[1]](#endnote-1)

In pondering the challenges of following Christ

Both in his own day as well as in ours

I recalled a fictional exchange

Between an auto mechanic and a heart surgeon.

*The heart surgeon took his car to his local garage for service, where he often exchanged a little friendly banter with the owner, a skilled but not especially wealthy mechanic.*

*"So tell me," said the mechanic, "I've been wondering about what we both do for a living, and why you get paid much more than me."*

*"Go one," said the surgeon.*

*"Well consider this," said the mechanic, as he worked on a large and sophisticated engine, "I check how it's running, open it up, fix the valves, and put it all back together so it works good as new. We basically do the same job don't we? And yet you are paid ten times what I am - how do you explain that?"*

*The surgeon thought for a moment, then gently replied with a smile, “Try fixing it with the engine running."*

Without in any way disparaging the importance of car mechanics

I do feel that negotiating the spiritual life

Is a little more like open heart surgery than engine repair.

This is especially true in the call from today’s readings

to decide, believe, follow and endure:

Tasks we have to achieve in our spiritual lives

When the rest of our relational, medical,

fiscal and emotional selves are running at full throttle.

Faith is tricky business,

In the words of the writer and preacher Frederick Buechner

*“Faith is disorderly, intermittent, and full of surprises….Faith is homesickness. Faith is a lump in the throat. Faith is less a position on than a movement toward, less a sure thing than a hunch. Faith is waiting.[[2]](#endnote-2)"*

And yet, in this waiting stance

In the ambiguity of the in-between

while engines are running at full throttle around us

we yet are expected to discern, decide, act and be faithful

in life, relationships, and belief.

Of course, such deciding has consequences

As in that graced and precarious relationship

Paul broaches in our second reading: Marriage.

As someone who knows precious little about marriage

I ordinarily avoid preaching on this topic.

The only time I ever heard my parents disparage a priest

Was on the way home from church

after he had preached on marriage

Which my folks assessed as “uninformed and stupid.”

I would not like to say something stupid

especially in the presence of so many marriage experts

I do understand something of the leap of faith

that becoming and sustaining this sacramental life requires.

insights that come wise relatives and friends,

ho over the decades have shared their wisdom about

the commitment of marriage in the proverbial

good times and bad.

Particularly poignant for me is a reflection by friends and theologians

James and Evelyn Whitehead who, at my request,

penned an essay on the spirituality of marriage

Refracted through the 50+ years of married life they shared.

They write about multiple movements, evolving seasons in marriage

from infatuation to commitment

then to fidelity and generativity

the evolution of shared care and a married lifestyle

finally arriving at the stage of devotion.

It is that final stage that most captures my imagination.

They write that devotion is love that is well-aged

It is the enfleshed affection that survives illness and aging

By this point child-rearing is long gone

Active careers are over

The couple’s love becomes an affection

Nuanced by the awareness of final days

Of threatening illness

They conclude that such devotion might be considered

*Eros* with wrinkles

They illustrate this devotional journey by citing the memoire

of John Bayley, which recounted his care for his wife

the British philosopher and novelist Iris Murdoch

as she suffered the ravages of Alzheimer’s.

Bayley wrote, “after more than forty years of taking our marriage for granted, marriage has decided it is tired of this and is taking a hand in the game. Purposefully, persistently, involuntarily, our marriage is now getting somewhere. It is giving us no choice, and I am glad of it.”[[3]](#endnote-3)

That reflection by Jim and Evelyn Whitehead published 2 years ago

Is even more touching in light of Evelyn’s death last fall.

Her husband, Jim, is more than ever

Pondering the deep vocation of that devotion

as he grieves the loss of his beloved partner.

Our society, our Church would benefit greatly

By drinking deeply of this difficult devotional gift:

a counterpoint to the pervasive “make me great” mentality

the antithesis of the power-lust and egocentrism

that threatens the “us” with the almighty “I”

that eschews the common good for personal gain

that brow-beats the other for personal advancement.

The bible reminds us, it is not good for people to be alone (Gen 2:18)

It is right and just that we endure with each other

In good times and in bad

In sickness and in health

In the fullness of living and the auguring of death.

Thus today we honor in a distinctive way the married:

those who embody God’s own covenant with humanity

that the church declares to be the most perfect image

Of Christ’s spousal bond with his Church.

The covenant love and devotion

forged in the crucible of married life

reveals the stubborn and enduring faith

mirrored at the end of today’s gospel.

So we pray that the gifts of those who live this sacramental bond

might anoint this broken world, scarred church, divided country

so that God’s covenant with humanity that they embody

might blossom into a new covenant with each other

Be that family or stranger,

Friend or foe

comrade in race, religion or political affiliation

or opponent across each of those spectrums

as we are nonetheless all children of God,

Through Christ our Lord.

1. G.K. Chesterton, “The Unfinished Temple,” in *What’s Wrong with the World, Collected Works* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), 4:61. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Frederick Buechner, *Secrets in the Dark: A Life in Sermons* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), p. 72. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. James and Evelyn Whitehead, “Promises to Keep: A Spirituality of Christian Marriage” (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 2019), 9-10. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)