

August 23, 2015, Sermon by Rev. Chip Whitacre
Proper 16, Year B
John 6:56-69

Lynne and I are just back from three weeks on the Gunflint Trail. It was three weeks of uninterrupted time with each other, our family and some friends. It was three weeks of no highway construction, airport noise, television, radio, newspapers, email or phone. To some that would be torture. To us it was a blessing. But even so, it took us a few days to get beyond the noise of our life here. Getting into a new rhythm that matches the quiet surroundings of the north woods takes some time. It's not like we weren't productive mind you. We were reading and hiking and fishing and blueberry picking. Serious endeavors all planned with great care at least ten or fifteen minutes before they occurred. And let me not forget napping. No plan is needed for that. The only plan you need for a good nap is the knowledge that you are experiencing tiredness that is way out of proportion to the low level of energy you are expending.

Then there was the relational bonus. Getting to have an uninterrupted conversation with each one of our children and grandchildren was definitely a gift. Hanging out with friends that we haven't seen in a while was a special treat this year. Cocktail hours and mealtimes were gatherings unlike anything we can experience when everyone is connected to their regular daily lives. They were deliberately slow-paced times. There were, after all, no schedules to be maintained. No soccer matches or music lessons to get to.

And, of course, there are the memories that become part of family lore and are revisited from year to year. How a son-in-law wondered what we might find to do since there wasn't a TV in the cabin. The hike to Magnetic Rock the year it was so hot. The bat that somehow got into the cabin one night and needed to be politely ushered out. The years after the big fire when there were so many blueberries. The uproar an animal the size of a mouse can cause in a group of adults. Sightings of bear, moose, and wolves in the wild. The wonder inspired by seeing the Milky Way like it can never be seen in the city.

To say the least our time away was wonderful. It was filled with new memories that will become new stories. We are blessed to be able to do it every year. And we are even more blessed that all of our children and grandchildren make the journey north to spend some of the time with us. It is a relaxing and refreshing time that offers a fresh perspective on living each day. And it is a perfect contrast to what comes next.

That's the coming home part. One day you realize that it is time to go. Suddenly, you find yourself in a flurry of activity that is unlike previous days. A dark sense of purpose has wedged its way into your daily reverie. Everything is packed up and stuffed rather unceremoniously into the car. The canoe is strapped on top. The red dust of the north woods is stuck on everything like glue – your badge of pilgrimage. And then there you are, on the road again. As you get closer to civilization you are joined by other pilgrims. All slowly coming to the realization that the race is on again. First it is tens, then its hundreds, and eventually its millions of other families loaded down with stuff and pressing towards home.

Within hours the flow of information reaches its previous level. You re-enter the electronic zone and the 24/7 news cycle. The indiscretions of athletic directors - the plight of refugees from multiple wars – the loss of the young and innocent lives – the latest Twins slump - all come rushing

back at you. The candidates for an election that is still over a year away are shouting their policy positions to audiences at state fairs and factories around the country. Some of the things they say are so outrageous as to be laughable. But it works. They are heard above the din of it all and rewarded with leading positions for their efforts.

When you are able to connect to the web you find that your inbox has hundreds of messages. Some tell you that work left until your return has started to bubble over. Some report that catastrophe is just over the horizon – an action the “other” guys, the ones whose politics you disagree with, are about to take will surely lead to disaster. You must send money right now. Tomorrow is too late. And you find dozens of voice messages. You find that the same telemarketer has left you thirteen messages about the new hearing aid his company is selling. The noise of it all is deafening. You don’t need a hearing aid. You need earplugs.

I think Jesus knew all about this situation. He understood human society. After all life in first century Palestine probably wasn’t so much different in some respects from life today. People then were focused on the many demands of daily living just like we are now. There were competing cultural interests in a society with many constituencies. There were authorities, real and imagined, that demanded allegiance over and above the expectations of the primary religious culture. The noise of society was probably just as deafening as it is today. And Jesus knew that to get his message across he had to shout it out. Just like the prophets before him and Donald Trump today, he knew that if his alternative message was going to be heard it had to be a radical departure from the status quo. That’s what he is doing with all this talk of eating his flesh and drinking his blood. It is his way of getting people’s attention. And it works.

He definitely gets people’s attention. Some of his followers are so offended that they stop going around with him. And it’s easy to see why they would. No observant Jew would consider eating flesh with blood still in it, much less human flesh. Only pagans ate meat with the blood still in it. But those who are offended are the literalists. They are the ones who hear the initial message, take Jesus literally, and then stop listening. As a result they miss the invitation to real life that Jesus is offering.

There are, however, others who continue to listen. They hear the whisper of a deeper meaning. They remember the story of God’s sustaining action in the wilderness. They hear the echo of Moses farewell address and his admonition to “choose life”. They take Jesus seriously. They realize that he is offering something well beyond the consumption of food for daily sustenance. They understand that he is offering an extraordinary invitation to life beyond anything they can imagine.

So, we gather here today and every Sunday to share in that feast. We choose to take Jesus seriously. But then what? We must leave here after all. Just like when a vacation comes to an end. We must go from the quiet back out into the reality of daily life – into the presence of a culture that is in danger of drowning us all in sea of noise. That is exactly the point - that we come here to be renewed so we can go back into the world refreshed. And when we go we are bound to go as disciples of the risen Christ. We are bound to witness to him by word and example. We have Jesus with us all the way. But how will we make our witness heard above the background noise of the world in which we live our daily lives?