

The Rev. Brandon Ashcraft
The Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 14 (Year B)
John 6:35; 41-51
Trinity Church in the City of Boston
August 11, 2024

Curating an Eternal Life

As newcomers to Boston, my husband Bob and I have enjoyed exploring its many centers of art and culture. We already have some favorites: The Athenaeum. The MFA. The Coolidge Corner Theater. But my absolute favorite is the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, which is unlike any museum I've ever visited. What captivates me about the Gardner is its wonderfully creative curation. Each piece of art in its 20-something galleries has been carefully and thoughtfully placed. As a result, the pieces interact with each other to tell stories. Sometimes the conversations taking place are obvious. Other times, the connections are more subtle.

It's no accident, I'm told, that [Rembrandt's self-portrait](#) was placed directly across the room from two of his later paintings. The ones that were famously stolen 34 years ago. This placement left the 23-year-old artist of the self-portrait gazing at his later works across the room, as if looking across the horizon of time to catch a glimpse of his future. Then there is "[The Virgin of Mercy](#)," a 17th century painting of the Madonna holding the infant Jesus. Perched on a ledge nearby is a [white marble sculpture of a foot](#). At first glance this placement seems completely random. Until you notice the Virgin Mary is caressing the foot of the infant Jesus! The sculpture directs our focus to this tender act of maternal affection captured in the portrait.

Much like the pieces in the Gardner Museum, the stories of the gospels are also placed and ordered with intentionality. While the gospels are rooted in historical events, they are not purely historical accounts of Jesus' life. The four evangelists – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John – are artists in their own right. And as literary artists, they creatively curate the events of Jesus' life to tell their version of his story. The order and sequence they choose, and the way events and characters interact

with each other, imbues each gospel with a *particular* richness and a *particular* theological depth. Because John's curation is so distinct, we notice this chiefly in his Gospel. Consider, for example, the dramatic story of Jesus cleansing the Jerusalem Temple, when Jesus overturns the tables of the money changers. Matthew, Mark and Luke place this story in the final week of Jesus' life. John, conversely, places it at the *beginning* of Jesus' ministry, and his choice to do so is anything but random. To the first century Jewish people, the Jerusalem Temple was the dwelling place of God. By placing the Temple confrontation at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, John centers Jesus' identity as a Temple. The dwelling place of God. The "Word [who] became flesh and dwelt among us."¹

We see a similar dynamic in the gospels' treatment of the eucharist. Matthew, Mark and Luke institute the eucharist at Jesus' final meal with his disciples. "On the night he was handed over to suffering and death [when] our Lord Jesus Christ took bread..."² By placing the eucharist in the shadow of Good Friday, they center the eucharist as a proclamation of Jesus' death until he comes again. John, on the other hand, makes no mention of bread or wine at the Last Supper. Instead, John places his eucharist in the middle of Jesus' life. In the middle of his earthly ministry. More precisely, in a 50-verse dialogue about bread between Jesus and a hungry crowd.³ This morning's Gospel reading comes from this "Bread of Life Discourse," making this the second week in our four-week journey through John's exploration of the eucharist.

In the passage we heard this morning, John, the artist, weaves a narrative thread into the tapestry of his Gospel. And this thread links Jesus, the "Bread of Life," with an event from the Hebrew scriptures also involving bread. As we just heard, Jesus declares that he is the "bread of life,"⁴ the "living bread [that has come down] from heaven."⁵ The crowd would no doubt have recalled that centuries earlier, God sent another bread from heaven called "manna" to sustain their

¹ John 1:14

² From Eucharistic Prayer A of the American Book of Common Prayer (1979), p. 362.

³ John 6:22-71

⁴ John 6:35

⁵ John 6:51

ancestors in the wilderness. This event from the Exodus then becomes like that marble statue in the Gardner Museum: a signpost to illuminate the portrait John is painting. As John continues weaving this Exodus thread, Jesus reminds the crowd that the manna their ancestors received provided temporary sustenance. It was indeed life-giving bread, but only to a point. The bread Jesus offers provides nourishment of a different sort:

- “I am the bread of life,” Jesus says. “Whoever comes to me will never be hungry...”⁶
- “Whoever eats of this bread will live forever...”⁷
- “Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life...”⁸

Jesus repeats this note of “eternal life” over and over in John’s gospel. Indeed, we’ll hear him speak about eternal life again next week and the week after that. And just as Jesus expands the crowd’s concept of “heavenly bread,” we need to expand our concept of “eternal life.” When we hear the words “eternal life,” we typically understand the word “eternal” to be a measure of duration. Eternal life is a life that lasts forever. A life that has no end. And that *is* what eternal life means but not *all* that it means. The concept of eternal life in John’s Gospel isn’t defined solely by the *duration* of life. It is not only about the *quantity* of life, but also the *quality* of life. The eternal life Jesus offers is a life of a particular fullness. A life of depth and richness. A life that is “eternal” because it shares his very life. Because Jesus is God, and God is without beginning or ending, participation in his life means that our life cannot end in death. But by sharing in the quality of his life, eternal life is also a life of generosity. A life of selfless identification with those on the margins. A life of reconciliation and wholeness. And here’s the best part: we do not have to wait until our death to enjoy this eternal life. This eternal life is a gift offered to us in this life. A gift we can enjoy today.

⁶ John 6:35

⁷ John 6:51

⁸ John 6:47

When we gather at this table for the eucharist, we are joined by the whole company of heaven. The eucharist offers us a foretaste of the heavenly banquet we will one day enjoy on the other side of death. But when we feed on the Body and Blood of our Lord, the gift of eternal life is not simply stored away for the day we die. The power of that bread and wine, in which Jesus is really and truly present, is that it draws us into Jesus' divine life today. Like the writers of the gospels, we get to decide where we place the eucharist in the story of our lives. And each Sunday celebration of the Holy Eucharist is an invitation to renew our commitment to following Jesus. Each Sunday, when we trod the well-worn path to this table, we are called to deeper lives of faith.

We are invited to make an honest appraisal of where we've placed Jesus in our lives, and to make a choice to place him at its center. No matter where you are on your journey with Jesus, today you are invited to begin anew. To draw near to this table to receive bread for a different kind of life. Bread that draws you into Jesus' very life. The eternal life he freely offers, here and now. Amen.