

I will confess it has been challenging to reflect this week on a biblical teaching telling us that to eat this bread is to live forever when, in fact, so many in our community seem to be dying - of cancer, mostly.

We have been eating this bread all our lives, we might retort, and yet we are emphatically *not* living forever, and it feels like Jesus is lying to us, and it really is not fair, and we really do not like it.

Since we cannot take this teaching literally, we might instead spiritualize it in order to make sense of it, to let Jesus off the hook, to say it *really* means we will go to heaven when we die - and *that* is how we will *live forever*. More of that pie in the sky bye and bye spirituality that helps us cope but can seem somewhat escapist.

It is comforting, to be sure, and perhaps even true, but this spiritualized teaching by logical extension would also mean that those who do *not* eat this bread - either because they are not explicitly Christian or because, like me, they are diabetic and bread in any form is off limits, will therefore not go to heaven.

The Greek gives us a third way, perhaps as the Buddhist might call it, a middle way: neither literalizing nor spiritualizing the deeper truth Jesus is trying to express throughout this entire chapter.

As I shared with you last week, there are two words for *life* in the Greek, each expressing a slightly different approach to the concept. *Bios* in the Greek refers to each unique precious, individual life: the parsley and the Priscilla; the dahlia and the David, the rose and the Rie, the gladiolus and the Gusti. *Bios* is beautiful and distinct, singular and special, particular and personal.

*Bios* is YOU and me and every living thing that we love. *Bios* is all the ways we celebrate the vast creativity of God, with limitless diversity, and stunning harmony.

*Bios* is also fleeting. On a planet that has circled our sun for some four or five *billion* years, even the longest living hundred million year old micro-organism can survive a mere fraction of that time.

The *human* life-span, even at its most lengthy, cannot begin to compare. As our funeral liturgy declares, even of the hundred million year old micro-organism: *We are mortal, formed of the earth, and to earth shall we return.*

Which brings us to the second word for life in the Greek: *Zoe*. *Zoe* is the *concept* of life, with all of its cycles, and all of its decay, and all of its rebirth.

*Zoe* is vegetables *and* vultures, *Zoe* is monkeys *and* maggots, *Zoe* is humus *and* hyenas. *Zoe* is the earth itself, and all of the cosmos besides, infused with the divine Spirit of regeneration and rejuvenation and revivification.

*Zoe* is Life with a capital L - the powerful play that goes on and on, and we each in our *bios* may contribute a verse.

When the Jesus of John's Gospel says he comes to bring *abundant life* or that those who trust in him will have *eternal life* or that those who eat the bread will *live forever*, he is talking about *Zoe*. When the Jesus of John's Gospel describes himself as The Bread of Life, he is describing the profound union of his personal *bios* with the universal *Zoe*, the Source of All That Is, and inviting us into a similar union. When the Jesus of John's Gospel tells us that eating The Bread of Life will lead us to live forever, he is trying to instill in us a deeper awareness that the death of his *bios* - and ours - is but one part of the perpetuation of *Zoe*.

As our funeral liturgy continues, *All of us go down to the dust, yet even at the grave we make our song: Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!*

It was, in fact, one of the dying in our own community who preached this Alleluia to me, when I visited last. As Joel Blunk and I sat together with Kristen on their back porch up at Rolling Ridge, we watched the sun sparkle through the trees and the grass, a cardinal flying by, and then a hawk. *Bios* mixed with *Zoe* in all of its radiant beauty emanating within us and beyond us.

It was, as we say of West Virginia, our home, *Almost Heaven*.

As we marveled in the goodness of Life with a capital L, Joel stretch out his hand toward the hills and began to speak, struggling to get out the words through the effects of the tumor on the language centers of his brain. *It has to be this way*, Joel finally uttered, with a calm sense of urgency. *I have to die ... so that all of this can go on.*

Joel Blunk, fully united with the Source of All That Is, fully aware that the gift of his precious, unique, beautiful and distinct *bios* is approaching its final months, is at peace with *Zoe*.

To be in Joel's presence, as his *bios* prepares to die is to feel, to see, to know *Zoe*.

*This* is the peace that passes all understanding. *This* is the Bread of Life on which we can feast forever.

While Joel was at peace when he said these words, you can be sure that Kristen and I were not. Tears quickly came to our eyes, and a big knot caught up in my throat. For Joel's sake - and for our own - we smiled, and nodded, and grasped his hands tight. The outright bawling came later.

And Jesus understands. He holds out compassion for all the ways we deny death and its meaning for life, including for many of us 21st century post-Enlightenment over-achievers, all of the ways we escape our emotions by engaging in a sort of hyper-intellectualism about it all.

But the Jesus of John's Gospel, as compassionate as he is, insists on cutting through the intellectual incredulity expressed by some in the crowd. He tries again and again to lead them into a deeper communion with God and with creation.

That is the job of a mystic, after all.

For the rest of us mere mortals, we catch glimpses of the truth through the mystics in our midst. We catch glimpses of wisdom imparted through John's Gospel. We catch glimpses of a peace that passes understanding through our practice of the Sacrament of Communion.

One loaf becomes the body of all that lives, broken and shared and thereby *zoe-ing* forever. Each morsel encourages us to contemplate a deeper, more profound gratitude for *whatever has the shape and the flavor of bread*, as the poet says: *the earth itself, beauty and love*.

One cup becomes the lifeblood of all that lives, flowing with grace that all may *zoe* forever. Each sip we encourages us to discover a deeper, more profound commitment to all that perpetuates the outpouring of Love, not for ourselves alone, but seeds enough for all creatures of the earth, *freely given, to multiply*.

The gifts of the table become the presence of *bios* wrapped up in *Zoe*. One Bread. One Body. One Life for All.

*This* is why we come to the table of grace, of peace, of love, of joy. *This* is why we come to the table of hope. Not as an intellectual exercise or an anti-intellectual spiritualist escapism. But as a physical, tangible, *living* reminder of what is too easy to forget in our day-to-day *bios*:

When we feast on the Source of All Life, and celebrate our own *bios* within it, we are truly able to *Zoe* forever.