

I don't know about y'all, but I want to spend some time with mystery-writer Number One-Eleven. That's right, I'll clear my calendar – tea, coffee, lunch, even a quick Zoom – I'll do whatever it takes to spend some time with our psalmist. I love the content of our author's psalm. But even better, I love the enthusiasm she has for her Creator, and all the created beings who stand in community with her.

The Psalmist loves God, and the psalmist loves to be in the company of people who, just like her, love hearing God's story, too!

For our psalmist, God's truth is authentic; God's work is both impactful and inescapable; God's character is good, and decent, and righteous.

The psalmist tells us that God does wonderful deeds: God creates. God provides. God protects. God tamed the chaos monster, rained manna in the wilderness, and removed a nation from captivity.

God is faithful and consistent in every generation. God is collaborative, bound in the covenant of Creator, people, and land. God offers a restorative justice steeped in jubilee. And yet this God who is powerful enough to create the universe and flummox Pharaoh is somehow SO humble. This God is accessible, interested in every created being, and eager to give license and voice to their varied gifts.

“What a story!” the psalmist proclaims! “And when I hear that story,” she says, “When I tell God's story, when I dwell in the company of others who are excited about God's story, too, my heart is full, and I offer my devotion and gratitude to God.”

Our lectionary text today follows several weeks of readings from John's gospel. We've talked a lot about Jesus as the bread of life this summer. We've talked about the kind of bread that feeds you for a day, and the kind of bread of that fills you for a lifetime. When I hear the psalmist this morning, it's evident that she has found living bread in the community of faithful, loving, and joyful believers.

The pandemic has offered me a new understanding of living bread. If I am honest with you, I have had more bread in the last 18 months than at any time in my existence. Cookies while I binge another Netflix thriller; preparing meals has become a form of entertainment, a distraction from my isolation; and snacking often seems an efficient way to push through paperwork. I have been fed, filled even, but rarely fulfilled. Food, in these times, is but a commodity. And of course, there's more to it than empty calories. There's an emptiness to this privilege of inconvenience. As much as my life has been turned up-side-down, I've not had to worry about an ability to pay my bills, or find my next meal, or ensure a roof over my head, or receive access to needed healthcare.

What I understand more than ever in these trying days, is that our minds, and hearts, and souls must be fed by one another. When our communities gather for worship, we rightly praise our Creator, but we also remind one another of our higher, more purposeful callings. We are reminded that the needs of our neighbors have not vanished; we are reminded that God has called each one of us to minister to those needs; to be creative, innovative, and compassionate in meeting both new and existing needs in changing and challenging seasons.

When we are isolated from one another, it's easy for us to compartmentalize our grief and struggles, to see them as separate from the world. We can tend to minimize our gifts and strengths, doubt our ability to make change in our communities. But most of all, when we remain absent from community, I think we are much less likely to notice God's story, to feel God's presence, to faith in the not-yet-that-will-someday-be. Let me put it another way: fellowship reveals our presence and purpose in God's unfolding story.

Congregational work is SO rewarding, but it also exhausting. And there are times when one wonders, "Is anyone paying attention to this? Are we doing this right? Do we have what it takes to incarnate God's love in the world?"

One day last year, such thoughts crept in my head. Through the magic of Zoom, I reached out to Ruth. I wanted to know how she was facing the challenge of pandemic. I wanted to hear what God was calling her to do, and how the spirit was moving in her life. I was delighted to learn that she was interested in hearing some of the same things from me.

So...we talked. We shared our celebrations. We affirmed one another's accomplishments. We listened and grieved with one another about the things we were missing. We encouraged and reminded one another that we were doing good work, even if SO much of that work was unfamiliar, and sometimes choppy and unsteady. And we prayed for the spirit's movement in our communities.

And the most amazing thing happened. We kept talking. And pretty soon, both congregations joined the conversation: we shared readings

and greetings in virtual worship; we shared focus group videos from congregants about the challenges of pandemic in each congregation; we've read each other's newsletters and correspondence; we're simply more aware of one another. And today...

Praise the LORD! We give thanks to the LORD with our whole hearts, in the company of the upright, in the congregations of Grove Lane and Sardis.

I have perfected a few of my favorite sandwiches this year, and I have enjoyed them while I watched first-rate TV programs and movies and sporting events. But nothing fills me more, nothing gives me more pleasure, nothing gives me more hope, than knowing that while I sleep, there's a faithful body of believers in Cheadle Hulme who are working together to realize God's call. Your pursuit, just like ours at Sardis, is messy, and human, and filled with ups and downs, and rooted in God's spirit and joy. And as your day draws to a close, the sun rises here, and we at Sardis seek to walk the same walk as you.

There's a vast ocean between us, and two time zones, and a lingering pandemic, and technology monsters that do their best to disrupt our signals, and yet somehow, someway, we are connected. And if we're connected, one can only imagine the vast and intricate network of believers that extends among us and beyond us.

This morning, we'll share a table, too. One that overcomes any obstacle and boundary set in its way; a place where all are welcome, where God's hospitality, inclusion, and love are made tangible. Three little words, "take and eat," transcend space and time; we needn't even

Bread for the Upright
Bob Stillerman
Twelfth Sunday After Pentecost, Proper 15, 8/15/2021
Community Service with Grove Lane and Sardis Baptist Churches
Psalm 111



a spiritually
progressive
community
of faith

consume the actual matter of bread and wine. We find the living Christ. We find one another. We stand together in the company of the upright.

Friends, we have joined together in banquet, and we partake of the living bread in the presence of the loving God. May this bread fill us in such a way that our lives might become bread for a world in need. May it be so, and may it be soon!

Amen.