

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

August 26, 2018

The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

John 6:56-69  
Joshua 24:1-2a,14-18  
Psalm 34:15-22  
Ephesians 6:10-20

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Like so many families with rising high school seniors, we have found ourselves this past summer trekking up and down highways, on road trips marked by fast food restaurants and traffic jams, staticky radio stations and bad drivers. We have become all too familiar with the 95 corridor, the NJ Turnpike and toll booths – lots of toll booths. I have also learned that I am quite masterful at hand gestures.

These joyful, family bonding experiences are otherwise known as the college search process. And, this past week, we found ourselves weaving through a maze of streets in the Bronx to end up at Fordham University. Road weary and stressed out, we walked in to the auditorium to hear the admissions presentation. We've heard more of these than we can count and at this point in the college search process, it takes a lot to peak my interest.

But Fordham, being a Jesuit institution, builds its mission on 3 Latin concepts:  
*Cura personalis. Homines pro aliis. Magis.*

Who knows what these mean?

***Cura personalis*** means “care for the whole person.” Your learning isn’t just about academics. You are there to build your entire self – mind, body, and spirit. But Fordham also understands that you can’t do this alone, you do it as a community.

***Homines pro aliis*** mean “people for others.” As you build yourself and your community, you work hard to apply your gifts to the greater good. Our knowledge and skills are to be applied, given to others, to uplift and serve.

And then there is ***Magis*** which means “more”. Fordham explains it as the concept of never ending improvement. We are always learning and growing.

Here’s how they helped us understand the concept of *magis* (and I want you to play along with me). Raise your hand as high as you can. Hold it there. Now...raise it even more. That’s ***magis***...when we think we have done all we can do but we realize we can do more. We can keep growing and contributing, questioning and learning. That’s never ending improvement. Not stopping at the easy point but reaching beyond our comfort level.

This movement – this space between when you first raised your hand and when you raised it a little higher – this is where growth happens. Where we learn a little more about who we are and what we have to give. But if stay at the initial act of raising our hand – the place where we

are comfortable, we never learn – we stay with what is easy, never having to look deeper into anything that makes us nervous or scared or uncertain. Never having to challenge ourselves.

Got the concept? Let's use that concept of *magis* to consider what's going on in John this week. We have spent the last 4 weeks on John 6, this one chapter, listening to Jesus talk about the promises of bread and wine, the body and blood of Christ. What have learned thus far?

Jesus has fed the 5,000. He helped people see how they can help one another. He has reminded them that their well-being comes from God, not from their efforts alone. He has encouraged them in their doubt. He has reminded them that he will always be with them. He has begged them to believe and to follow. Jesus has given his followers strength for the journey and food for the soul.

Our lectionary thinks this one chapter in John is so important that it keeps us coming back for 5 weeks breaking down 71 verses painstakingly so that we can gradually take in the entire message. And, this, the 5<sup>th</sup> week, what do we get? We get complaining. The people gathered with Jesus stand there and say, this teaching is just too difficult. We can't accept it.

Then, Jesus asks rather abruptly, does this offend you? And then he says, I know there are some among you who do not believe. And, in response, an entire group of followers up and leave. These are the folks who raised their hands initially and said, I will follow. But they got tired and discouraged. They began to doubt and my guess is that they questioned why following Jesus even mattered. So when Jesus asks for more, they put their hands down and walk away.

But, 12 people stay. When Jesus asks “do you also wish to go away or will you stay” these 12 raise their hands a little higher and say we have come to believe.

So, which group would you rather be in? The one that walked away or the one who stayed? I bet you all want to be in the latter group. Who wants to admit that they have turned away from God or given up on Jesus? We all want to believe we would be the ones saying, Lord, I have come to believe. Here I am! I am a GREAT Christian.

OK...so you are in the “good” group. But, I have to admit something. It's really a trick question. Because our lectionary leaves out 2 critical verses that close out the 6<sup>th</sup> chapter of John. The final words of Jesus' long discourse, of Jesus trying to get people to follow and to believe doesn't end with the 12 going forth with enthusiasm and raised hands. It ends with these words,

<sup>70</sup>*Jesus answered them, ‘Did I not choose you, the twelve? Yet one of you is a devil.’* <sup>71</sup>*He was speaking of Judas son of Simon Iscariot, for he, though one of the twelve, was going to betray him.*

Ouch. That's the end of the chapter. Even those who thought they had it all together, didn't. So, why would John end here? It's a rather harsh way to end such beautiful promises.

Maybe it ends here because no matter how much we want to follow, we will fail. Our arms will get tired. We may have moments that we do give up on Jesus, that we do walk away, even though we have said we come to believe.

I think John ends with this stark reality because it's a real reality. It's who we are. Life is going to let us down. Faith will at times feel distant. God won't answer every prayer the way we hope. People we love will leave and we will hurt. We will question why faith matters and we will wrestle whole-heartedly with God. Some of us may walk away...for a time.

However, what Jesus asks is for us to keep raising our hands – a little more. Coming back and moving into that space of growth. Allowing ourselves to dwell in the space in between – where sometimes there aren't easy answers. But Jesus knows – we certainly won't find the answers if we put our hands down and walk away for good.

Think about this. The teaching is difficult. It is hard to accept. If it weren't we wouldn't find ourselves wrestling with it so much. So, can't we just call a spade a spade and stop trying so hard to be in the "good" Christian group? Maybe we can simply allow ourselves to raise our hands, stretch a little more and live into the space in between and see what God can do.

Our reading from Ephesians reminds you to be strong in the Lord and to gain confidence from the ability of God to lift you up and sustain you when you strive to reach a little higher. These verses full of battle images and armor are active and dynamic. And, I guarantee you, they aren't about sitting still or walking away when the going gets tough. Because faith is active and dynamic.

And if coming to believe is hard for you, if you want to put down your hand and go home, I want you to remember two things. First – verse 10 from Ephesians tells us to be strong. Guess what? In Greek, this verb "to be strong" is a passive verb. That means it isn't talking about your strength alone. It's talking about a strength you are given, a strength from God to sustain you and give you hope. Be strong because God will make you strong.

Second, verse 13 tells us to stand firm. And I love this little tidbit..Each verb in our text from Ephesians is plural. That means we are being told that we don't have to stand firm alone. It's saying we stand firm with one another. In other words, our ability to grow and move into those spaces of uncertainty is to be done with others by your side. We are to be in community.

So, here's what I want you to take away...stop trying to be the good Christian, the one with all of the answers or the one with unshakeable faith. Simply be the one who is willing to raise your hand a little higher and be willing to come and believe. Rely on the power of God and the love of your community. Because this strength you so desire will come as you keep coming back to God. Amen.