



A Celebration of Rev. Michele's Ministry



A Sermon By
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Grace Episcopal Church
Silver Spring, Maryland

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<http://graceepiscopalchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/2015-08-23-MVH.mp3>

John 6:56-69

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The Thirteenth Sunday After Pentecost
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Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them... This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever.” ... Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. So Jesus asked the twelve, “Do you also wish to go away?” Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.”

In the name of the one holy and living God who was, is, and is to come. Amen.

This is the day that the Lord has made, let us be glad and rejoice in it. It is indeed a good day. I have mixed feelings today, ones of sadness and loss and others of joy and happiness. Sadness, because of the change, but joyfulness because I have spent the major part of my ordained ministry in this community. I could not have asked for a more diverse and rewarding place to be. And what a community it is, diverse politically, culturally, spiritually. People have died, people have been married, and babies have been born. Some have told me that I am moving uptown or that I am changing positions. But none of those things are true. In fact if my dear father, God rest his soul, thought that I was leaving a paying job to go to one that didn't pay, he would suggest that I needed my head examined and I had clearly forgot all that he tried to teach me.

But this morning, I must say to you that death makes you think about the finite aspects of our earthly life. Last year I became eligible for Medicare, how frightening is that! And my fellow clergy will agree that ministry is never part time, only the compensation. And with the multitude of jobs I have, I was working 6 sometimes 7 days a week. So what I am doing is really a life style change. A little self-care: taking the time to smell the flowers, so hopefully I will have one less position. I will miss this community but God keeps calling me to do other things and believe me, when I don't answer God's call it's not good. So let's talk about today's gospel, shall we?

When I take my grandchildren, Cameron and Madison, out to eat, they are given menus that have not only food choices but also puzzles to keep them occupied while their food is being prepared. Depending on the place we, or should I say, they have chosen, the menus contain a word find, a crossword puzzle, and a maze. As you might guess, if I have been seated beside 6-year-old Madison, I am engaged in helping her to solve these puzzles while we wait for the food to be served. The maze puzzle, depending on the restaurant, is always the most challenging. Together we try to figure out which way to draw a line through the confusing pathways so the bear can find the honey. As a child, I always found the maze the least satisfying of all the games. It usually became messy, with my pencil lines backtracked over each other. No matter how hard I tried to

see ahead, the pathways were so tightly packed it was hard to tell where they would lead. There were so many dead ends, so many turnarounds. It wasn't neat like the other games that could be figured out in your head before putting down the answers. For those of you who have had the fortune or misfortune of working with me know that I'm the type of person who likes things to be orderly in my mind, on paper, in my life. You will have also guessed that I am often frustrated, because real life is messy.

In the 6th chapter of John's gospel, Jesus feeds five thousand plus, and compares this windfall to the manna the Israelites had received centuries before when they wandered the wilderness. It seems the listeners' ideas about manna had been all neatly organized and placed in a theological box, a nice straight-sided crossword puzzle where everything fits just right. Manna was God's way of looking after the people of Israel. They received the blessing every day from God until they finally reached the land of promise. The end. Amen.

And then Jesus has a very long monologue about bread of life, which starts out nicely but ends with the command to eat his body and drink his blood. Now that is anything but neat and orderly. In fact, it is frightening and messy. "When many of his disciples heard it, they said, 'This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?'" (vs.60). Obviously, the cannibalistic references didn't help, but I think they also just did not like the way he was messing with the old stories. He was scribbling outside the lines, making the sensible puzzle of life they had imagined into a much more complicated maze. "Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him." (vs.66)

These were not just mere hangers-on who walked away. The writer of the gospel calls them "disciples." They were real followers, those who had probably been around for a while. They had liked the talk of Jesus, the idea of Jesus, but this messiness of Jesus was just too much. "Does this offend you?" he asked. (vs.61) The answer was apparently, yes.

And then Jesus turned to the twelve, the closest, most constant group, and the ones he could depend upon. "Do you also wish to go away?" (vs.67) Peter's answer is one of the favorite quotes of his in the gospels. "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life." (vs.68).

If they had really taken the manna story more seriously, they would have remembered what a meandering story it was. If those long-ago Israelites had walked in a straight line to the holy land it would have taken them a few weeks. But that is not what happened. They struggled with each other, they fought with their leaders, they didn't like God anymore, and most of all they couldn't agree on anything. Thus they wandered in a very messy way for a whole generation.

The followers of Jesus, in their best times, have understood that life does not travel in straight lines. Life throws us curves of one kind or another all the time. No matter how hard we try to make things straighten out, we don't have what it takes to do it. Cancer. A broken relationship. A sick child. An accident. A job loss. Conflict. An international financial crisis. An abusive spouse. Bad news. Bad memories. A death. These are not straight-line problems. They are a

maze. They are messy.

These words of eternal life are not like the ones that sat in the window of my office or sit on Rev. Andrew's desk in a cube or on a plaque hung on a wall or that get tossed into political campaigns. They are not always simple, cute, or easy to hear. These words of eternal life remind us that life is not always plain and straight forward; solutions to our problems and challenges are not straightforward.

It is exactly because the words of eternal life ring true that we cannot leave. Where would we go? Who else will tell us the truth about life? Who else has lived the truth about life so fully?

John's gospel begins with: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." For us/we Christians, there is something about the Word that we cannot seem to find anywhere else. The gospel words of eternal life go straight to our soul. The words are not meant to straighten the maze. Really they are not. But rather when we are winding our way around it, retracing our steps, losing our way at times, stumbling around outside the lines, we try not to feel utterly lost.

We are often on a winding and convoluted path, confusing, frightening, difficult, maze-like. But we have come to believe that somewhere on the path, the truth can be heard. God is with us in the maze, in the challenges, in the disappointments, in the frustrations, in all that life throws at us.

And so my sisters and brothers, we stay and we listen. This is not goodbye but rather we will see each other again as we continue to be a part of the Jesus movement. Amen.