

## **Jesus, Plato, and Mrs. Mabel Snyder**

The Rev. Mark Sherwindt, Pastor

Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church

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*Reflections on True Life, This Life, and Eternal Life*

Last week I had some lighthearted fun with these Bread of Life texts in the Gospel of John. We talked about manna from heaven and newfound knowledge about insect secretions, which became the 100 percent organic treat that taught the Israelites to trust God every day for the sweet tasting bread God provided daily. I suggested that sometimes it's better not knowing what it is that God is providing; but the lesson Israel learned was learning to trust that God does, in fact, provide on a daily basis, and that's the lesson Jesus sought to reinforce throughout the course of his ministry, and, in particular, through that well-known phrase we learn with the Lord's Prayer: "Give us this day our daily bread." It seems simple enough, and yet, this is the key to knowing everything that God desires, that Jesus teaches, and that we need.

Two Sundays ago, it wasn't so much a lighthearted look at this miracle, but a focus on the over-reaction of the multitude Jesus fed, which sought to make Jesus a king, a move that invited an extended discussion at this often overlooked aspect of Jesus' rejection of conventional routes to power. Promising prosperity, wielding the biggest stick and the mightiest sword, harnessing the institutions of religion to serve the interests of earthly power – economics, politics, and theocracy – these were the conventional paths to power that Jesus rejected, both in the wilderness when he struggled with temptation, and during the course of his earthly ministry, which culminated with the Cross as the climax of his call and the meaning of his message.

But John's message is not about these particulars, and I am not here today to repeat a message that can be found by reading sermons that are available in print in the Narthex. We've got to spend some time talking about the central mystery that occupies Jesus' attention here in chapter six of the Gospel of John. "Our ancestors ate manna in the wilderness, and still they died. . . . I am the living bread that comes down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I give for the life of the world is my flesh." That is the central mystery of salvation. It is the central mystery of the Christian faith. It is the central mystery we call Holy Communion, the Sacrament of the Eucharist instituted with the Lord's Supper. I am not going to enter into the medieval debate between Catholics, Lutherans, and Calvinists over how best to understand the presence of Christ's body and blood in the bread and wine of Holy Communion, since that can hardly be on Jesus' mind here in the Gospel of John. But still we must put away lighthearted musings about manna from heaven and busy butterflies spinning sweet treats while the Israelites slept. We've got to ask ourselves what this gift of true life that Jesus gives really is. How do we really lay hold of it? What does the body and blood of Christ in Holy Communion have to do with it?

Plato is a great Greek thinker who lived five centuries before Christ; and while Plato had little effect on Jesus, his disciples have had a great impact on us in honing to philosophical perfection the difference between things spiritual and matters physical. It was Plato who pioneered the contrast between the physical realm that is passing away and the spiritual realm that is eternal. In this Platonic sense, when Jesus says that our ancestors ate physical bread for their physical bodies and still they died, there is no surprise, since this is what physical bodies do. Plato would say that in referring to true life, Jesus wasn't talking about physical life, but to matters of the spirit, to truths that are enduring, to life that lasts, our spiritual lives.

Over the course of history, I have found that when you mix Plato's platitudes with Persian religions, you wind up, not with eternal life versus eternal nothingness, as Plato imagined, but with an eternity of blessing versus an eternity of darkness and death, with images of punishment that we associate with heaven and hell, images that highlight the contrast and difference between this life and the next. But the truth is that we're mixing too many religious ingredients in this mishmash of mumbo jumbo to get Jesus' point. We've got to stay focused on the Hebraic mindset of the Old Testament as the cradle in which Jesus' own thoughts were formed, as the context in which his promises find their meaning and offer their hope. The Old Testament did not think that the physical life of the body was evil. The spirit wasn't given as contrast, but for completion, to perfect the physical as the gift from God that it was and is. Sure, we all know that our lives are more than the physical, material world of flesh and blood; but as Dietrich Bonhoeffer observed in his reflecting on the Biblical account of creation, we do not just have bodies, we are our bodies. They shape who we are and express whose we are as children of God.

I had the good pleasure of visiting Mabel Snyder yesterday. Mabel is ninety years old. Physically, she's seen better days; but she is still at her peak of being one of the sweetest souls you can imagine meeting. Mabel fractured her hip last year, and has become a resident at St. Luke's Lutheran Community on Applegrove Street. But before that break, she came to church weekly, sang in the choir, led the Women's Bible Study, worked with Zion's Comfort Givers, and the list goes on and on over the many decades of her life at Zion. I recall a wonderful article she wrote for an Easter Devotional Guide several years ago, when she recalled coming to church via horse and buggy! This past year, when we wrote our Lenten Devotional Guide, her contribution was featured on her ninetieth birthday, March 21<sup>st</sup>. Listen as I read from her meditation: "There is not a ministry offered here at Zion that Mabel has not at one time or another assisted with as a faithful member of our church family.... Pastors have come and gone, and all of them have known Mabel as a faithful, hard-working, soft-spoken, and supportive partner in the ministries we've pursued. Choir directors have come and gone, and her favorite is always *the one we're singing with now.*"

In Mabel's own words, words so characteristic of Mabel's way in the world, she writes, "I have not asked for much, and demanded even less. But I have received far more than I

could ever have imagined!” There is nothing that would bring greater joy to Mabel than to enter the doors of Zion, walk down this center aisle to Holy Communion, sing God’s praises with the Zion’s choir, and study God’s Word with Zion’s women. For Mabel, loving this church is sweeter than life itself, because it is our connection with God’s love and God’s people, gifts that will be ours for all eternity. To know and love Mabel is to affirm the continuity, not belabor the contrast, between this life and the next. That’s an essential aspect of the Hebraic mindset Jesus inherited, and an essential aspect of the promises he makes with regard to true life, the life we share with God, the life that never ends. I’m not suggesting that we all need to become like Mabel, although in some respects that could be a good thing. More to the point, Mabel has caught the connection that Jesus proclaimed as basic, living as though there was a seamless continuity connecting our hopes for true life in heaven with the faithfulness that guides the contribution we seek to make here and now in the life of the church. God sees the connection, and affirms the seeming insignificance of the difference we make as contributing forever to the life His love adds to the shape of the universe.

There’s no special mantra that opens the gates of heaven, like a secret door to a hidden passageway, as in the familiar saying, *Open says-a-me ... in the name of Jesus*. There’s no divine incantation that makes the invisible dimension of the spiritual realm magically and mystically appear before our very eyes, like Neo being reborn through the love that connects him to Trinity in *The Matrix*. The key is not verbal, or visual. There’s no *red or blue pill* that will open our eyes to the truth of life as it truly is. Rather, Jesus tells us that the simplest act of kindness is never forgotten in God’s eternal life. The spiritual life of Christ’s Body, tangibly present in the life of the church, receives what we offer in service to our neighbor as “a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (Ephesians 5:2), endowing our humblest effort to love one another with a significance that carries the divine approval of God’s ultimate embrace.

True life is not the antithesis to life as we know it on earth, in the sense that God’s life is eternal and ours is inextricably immersed in mortality. The true life Jesus promises is not a great escape from everything physical, fleeting, bound by time and overtaken by death. True life begins now, and affirms the life we now live as a gift of God and a call to serve. This is the connection we see through the eyes of Mabel Snyder, a partner in this ministry we share, taking up the challenge together to enter into the community of God’s people so that we can learn to trust God, to live lives based on trust not mistrust, striving to use the power of God’s love, not the coercion of force, to proclaim our witness to God’s life and love alive among us. The connection Jesus makes between this life and true life is summed up on the weekly edition of the *News Page*, where we say we are *gathered by God’s Word and empowered by Christ’s life to invite our friends and neighbors to join us as we grow in love and service by grace*. True life is not any more complicated than that. It’s not about the wide difference between God’s eternity and our mortality. It’s about the simple difference we are called to make by living every day, one day at a time, each day as it comes ... in Jesus’ name. Amen