

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost
August 16, 2009
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church
Buffalo, New York
The Rev. Eric Olaf Olsen

On August 6th, while taking a walk in NYC on a trip to visit family, screen writer and director John Hughes suffered a heart attack and died. His films dominated and helped define the 80s. Many were offbeat comedies that dealt with the complex search for meaning, identity and belonging. One of his most famous works, *The Breakfast Club*, is about five high school students from different social cliques that are required to come together for a Saturday morning detention. At the beginning of the movie they are suspicious of one another and judge one another according to common stereotypes, but as the movie progresses they begin to share their lives with each other through allowing themselves to be vulnerable. The trust they extend leads to a respect for one another and each person is recognized as “somebody.” The principal, Mr. Vernon, considers pretty much all of them to be “nobodies” with no future and no hope of becoming anybody. He tells them to write an essay explaining - who they think they are? Two letters are drafted by the group and left in response to this assignment. The first is read at the beginning of the movie and the second at the end.

The beginning letter is as follows:

Saturday, March 24, 1984. Shermer High School, Shermer, Illinois. 60062.

Dear Mr. Vernon, we accept the fact that we had to sacrifice a whole Saturday in detention for whatever it was that we did wrong. What we did was wrong. But we think you're crazy to make us write this essay telling you who we think we are. What do you care? You see us as you want to see us... in the simplest terms and the most convenient definitions. You see us as a brain, an athlete, a basket case, a princess and a criminal. Correct? That's the way we saw each other at seven o'clock this morning. We were brainwashed.

The second letter is as follows:

Dear Mr. Vernon, we accept the fact that we had to sacrifice a whole Saturday in detention for whatever it was we did wrong, but we think you're crazy to make us write an essay telling you who we think we are. You see us as you want to see us... In the simplest terms and the most convenient definitions. But what we found out is that each one of us is a brain.....and an athlete.....and a basket case.....a princess.....and a criminal... Does that answer your question?...

Sincerely yours,

The Breakfast Club.

While the question of identity becomes an intense preoccupation as we reach adolescence and begin to separate from our family of origin and foster complex social networks with peers - who we are and who we believe ourselves to be are questions for a life time.

Like the breakfast club, our definitions are often based on our real or perceived assessments of our intellect, body image, psychology, social status and morality. Right? Who are you? “Well I’m a graduate of such and such; I am so tall or short, skinny or fat. I like/hate the way I look - I love the way I look. I am insightful; I have an anger problem, a health problem, or no problem. I live in this desirable part of town or not, I am married to him or her. I am single. I am _____’s son/daughter. These important people are my friends. I have no friends. I care about the environment, do good deeds, go to church every Sunday... I pollute and sleep in.”

But can a list like this truly define who we are? Do we even know the value of such things or do we borrow values from our culture without even questioning them? Most of these values are arrived at through comparisons with other people who have more or less than we do or who dominant voices in society deem to be better or worse than we are.

If we want to build ourselves up, we will put our list up against those who have less “points” than us. “I am smarter than, thinner than, sexier than, more put together than, have more kids than, have been divorced less than, am richer than, have more face book friends than, am more holy than....” And we all do it don’t we? This is what our culture urges us to do; this is how advertising works... (The following is spoken in the voice of a sales pitchman...) *Be better than_____.* *Be “Somebody” by buying this identity marker and we will keep running ads to tell others who you really are and therefore reinforce that value.*

Yes there is the other side of course. We allow others, or we define ourselves, by how few points we have in relation to others. We believe we are losers and are of little importance or value because of what we have failed to achieve. We don’t look the right way. We don’t have the right job. Our family is not a kind that society values. Our relationships are broken. We are not wealthy enough. We are confused, frustrated, depressed and tired. We feel like a Nobody!

The truth is probably that we feel and experience both. Both scenarios however are folly, wastes of time, and produce false and incomplete truths. Both are distractions from the reality that Jesus calls us to and therefore are sinful, self centered, narcissistic diversions. The first degrades other people and tries to turn them into “nobodies.” In the second scenario, we degrade ourselves and deny our inherent value.

Our texts appointed for this day seek to impart some ancient, but authentic wisdom upon us. In Proverbs we see that wisdom is calling the simple, the humble, to eat a feast of bread and wine that leads to life. Later in the chapter we see that folly is also competing for the same followers, but the meal that is offered leads to death. Eddie Izzard, the English comic once did a skit about decisions. He asked the question - “Which will you choose, cake or death?” Remarkable... almost everyone chooses cake! For the author of proverbs the choice is also as clear... choose wisdom not folly. To be wise is to have and use knowledge. In the first chapter of Proverbs we hear that fear or reverence or dependence on the Lord is the beginning of such knowledge. We take instruction from those upon whom we are dependent, and therefore listening to what God has to say to us is of the utmost importance for our life and well being.

The writer of Ephesians adds the charge that we must make the most of our time as wise people, because the days are evil. In other words the longer we procrastinate, the more likely we will reject the cake and choose death, or fall back into the culture's broken and substandard method for defining humankind and assigning value. All of this discussion points us to our Gospel lesson.

This passage is the fourth evangelist's meditation on the Eucharist. When Jesus walked among his followers, he affirmed their intrinsic and inherent value as children of God. He called his followers friends and brothers and sisters. He spoke of God's love for each and every person. He reached out to the rich and to the poor, to the sick and the well, and to everyone in between and he treated them with dignity and kindness, love and forgiveness even when he was rejected and mistreated. At the end of the first century, when this, the latest of the gospels in our cannon was written, the people of God were a generation or more removed from the historic Christ event. And while the fourth gospel begins with the affirmation that the "Word became flesh and dwelt among us," there were few earthly dwellers left who brushed elbows with the historical Jesus. So where were they to experience Christ? They would encounter the Christ in the sacred, holy meal, the Eucharist! Feasting on Jesus, is feasting upon wisdom. While eating, Jesus is equated with believing in Jesus, the description in this passage uses an onomatopoeic word in the Greek language that reflects a noisy slurping and gulping, that a famished person might express when breaking a fast.

When the gathered community celebrated the Eucharist, they were given the chance to re-center themselves from the inside out. In the bread and wine they would meet Jesus, just as we do today. In meeting Jesus, all of popular society's false value judgments and identifying tags that elevate some on the backs of others are rent in two. This unique break-fast club that we are a part of remembers who we are in relation to God and one another. We remember that we are important because God says we are. We are loved because God loves us and proves his love for us, by giving us the gift of life and relationships, but most profoundly by giving us His most precious Son, Jesus, who lived, died and rose for you and me. We are children of God, and God gives us that identity. We are precious because Jesus' blood is precious and it was shed on our behalf and now it abides within us. This is a shared value. All of God's children are welcomed by Christ's invitation to embrace this identity and enjoy this noble esteem. The one who was diminished in order for us to be exalted was none other than our Lord and Savior who was raised by God and given the name that is above every other name - Jesus.

Starting tomorrow 1,045 voting members from 65 synods and 10,448 congregations serving on behalf of the 4,709,203 baptized members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America will gather together at the [Minneapolis Convention Center](#), under the theme, "God's work, our hands." Two significant issues will be considered at the assembly. One is "Confessing Our Faith Together: A Proposal for Full Communion between the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and The United Methodist Church." The ELCA already has full-communion agreements with five churches: the Episcopal Church, the Moravian Church in America, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the Reformed Church in America and the United Church of Christ. By God's grace, Lutherans understand that the Eucharist beckons us toward developing or modifying ecclesial structures and agreements in order to more truly reflect the real unity we enjoy in The Lord's Supper. The proposed resolution reads,

“The sacrament is a meal in which God provides for us what we need to be healthy and whole. As we eat Christ’s body and blood, we become the Body of Christ for the sake of the world. This meal unites us with God and with one another; the more time we spend at the Lord’s Table, the more we come to love one another and appreciate the Giver of every good and perfect gift.”

For all of the reasons I mentioned above, it is most likely that this resolution will be adopted and there will be great rejoicing throughout the Lutheran and Methodist churches. Also being considered is a social statement by the ELCA "Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust." This statement addresses key Lutheran principles about living faithfully in a complex world, amid complex social structures. It deals with the issues of trust in relationships, cohabitation, sexual exploitation, abuses of the ministerial office and healthy workplaces. If adopted, the ministry policies recommendation would make it possible for Lutherans who are in "publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous, same-gendered relationships" to serve as ELCA associates in ministry, deaconesses, diaconal ministers and ordained ministers.

While there continues to be vigorous debate and disagreement within the church on some of these matters, let us commit ourselves to pray that the unity, identity and the noble value of every child of God is respected and celebrated.

Together we are much more than a collection of “nobodies.” We are “Some Body”; we are Christ’s Body, broken and given away for the world to feast upon so that more and more of God’s children may be added to this beautiful Break- Fast club of God’s.