

WGUMC August 12, 2018 John 6:35, 41-51
“What Did You Do/Learn/Eat On Your Summer Vacation?”

School is starting back up this week and kids are going to be writing essays on what they did on their summer vacation. I, too, had a nice, long break this summer, so here is my report.

I can tell you without hesitation or qualification that I loved every single minute of my renewal leave. And I got to do almost everything I wanted to do. We took some short trips: to Kings Canyon and Sequoia National Parks and went to visit my sister and hike in Tahoe. I started a national parks quilt that I promised to Kristen. We had fun choosing from old national parks postcard art printed on fabric squares and looking for coordinating fabrics. I haven't made a quilt in over 20 years, and I had forgotten how much joy I get out of sewing. I also got to work on one item on my bucket list: learning to play the guitar. I set out to practice a half hour a day and learn three chords. I've sort of learned four, and I'm going to stick with it. Maybe someday I'll let someone hear me play.

But there were more blessings. Many more. I walked labyrinths in King's Beach, Petaluma, Fairfax, Bolinas and Menlo Park. I listened to sermons on YouTube as I sewed, sermons by some of the preachers I most admire: William Sloan Coffin, Fred Craddock, Barbara Brown Taylor, William Barber, Shane Claiborne, Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, Adam Hamilton, Rob Bell, Tony Campolo, Tom Troeger, and my current favorite, the presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church, Michael Curry. I spent time in the trees and added a few more essays to my collection on "tree therapy."

Hank and I went to six different worship services during those five weeks. We went to a bilingual mass and small group discussion at the Newman Center near San Jose State, led by Father Pedigo, the social justice coordinator for the Diocese of San Jose.

The next Sunday, we drove over the hill to one of the early "emerging churches" that meets in the old First Presbyterian Church near downtown Santa Cruz. They run a coffee-shop, music and art

gallery out of the fellowship hall seven days a week that serves the campus community.

While we were in Tahoe, we went to a Tuesday evening dinner church at King's Beach UMC, a church that is in the process of rebranding itself as a retreat center while maintaining a small group of locals who gather together on Tuesday nights, which makes more sense when you live and work in a resort community.

On the third Sunday, we went to a new multicultural United Methodist congregation that is meeting at Twin Towers UMC in Alameda. For a couple of years while I was in doctoral studies, I worked there as a Christian Education Director, when it was a very Caucasian congregation in a rapidly diversifying neighborhood. The good news is that twenty years later, the church is finally responding to the demographic shift!

On the fourth Sunday, we went to Westhope Presbyterian in Saratoga. They have a more traditional service but have added in

some contemplative practices, and I wanted to experience what that was like.

Last and best of all, last Sunday we made the trek out to Inverness to St. Columba's Episcopal Church where once a month they do a Celtic liturgy. I was delighted to discover that the priest is a professor of New Testament at the University of San Francisco and his very short homily was enough spiritual food for a month of Sundays. We stayed for the potluck, which we crashed, and for the Scripture meditation afterwards and went home with cups overflowing.

So that's what I did. But what did I learn? A lot of things. First, I learned that Ruby Goodnight was right. She used to tell me how her Methodist pastor father would take all of his vacation at one time. He would pack up the family and move to Yosemite for a month. When I would tell her that I was going away for a week, she would say, "You need take more time," and now I know that she was right. What a blessing it has been to be able to get up on a Sunday

morning and go to worship and not have to lead anything, do anything but sit in the pew and be ready for whatever the Spirit is stirring up that day. Going to a different church each Sunday taught me that you can meet God in any church, in any kind of worship service, if you are open to it. Remember that.

I also learned that even though I don't get to do that on most Sunday mornings, there are a lot of ways that I can feed my spirit, but I have to schedule them in during the week. For example, I started listening to sermons on YouTube while I cooked dinner and did the dishes. And that's oh so much better than listening to the news! It's so easy to get into bad habits that are so hard to break. It's a shame that they have to almost break you before you realize that's you need to take a break.

In this time away from work, I remembered what I love about my work, and I confess that I had started to lose touch with that. You know how it is. When you're in the same job for a certain number of years, you start to get a little stuck. You've already done

the easy things that needed to be done. You've picked the low-hanging fruit. Now comes the hard work, and you begin to think that the problems facing you are unsolvable; the people you have to deal with are unchangeable; and you know you need to do something or you're going to make everyone else miserable.

Listening for hours to other pastors talking about their passion helped me reconnect with mine. I come back resolved to pray the old prayer: "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can and the wisdom to seek the will of God and get out of the way of the Holy Spirit." Most of all, I'm newly committed to do what gives me joy and God glory, because I know that by the amazing grace of God, my joy will rub off on you.

I'm realizing that even after seven years, I can make a new beginning. "Morning has broken, like the first morning!" So I'm going to try to pretend that I don't know you, which is true. Only God really knows you. From God's perspective, what I think I know about

this church, what it can and can't do, doesn't mean much. As my forays into other faith communities taught me, there are lots of different ways to be church. The key here is not to follow some trend or be some other church, but to be the authentic community of Christ that you were called to be.

All the churches I went to were surprisingly good at welcoming Hank and me. The church members were well-trained at greeting visitors. I got a good feeling coming in the door. The congregations were not large and Hank and I stood out as visitors, and we were warmly greeted by many people in the pews. But one thing I missed in each of the churches was the feeling of a faith family that I sense here at Willow Glen. We sometimes take that for granted, but I want you to know that it is really pretty rare. If WGUMC has a "charism," a special gift to give to the wider Church, the broader community, it is this feeling of being a family of faith. So I come home with a renewed commitment to nurturing it.

You learn a lot of things when you leave home. Mostly, you learn to appreciate home. So you've heard what I did and some of what I learned. Now I'm going to tell you what I ate. A week ago Saturday, we went to a chocolate shop in San Francisco that sells 900 kinds of chocolate from 19 different countries. After drooling over all of them, I finally bought a bar made in Los Angeles that had sesame seeds, pumpkin seeds and kale in it! Delicious!

But by far the most delicious thing I ate during these five weeks away was the Bread of Life. Or, as Dr. Vincent Pizzuto at St. Columba's would say, I consumed Christ. Our Gospel reading comes after the story of the feeding of the 5,000. Jesus goes away and the people who ate their fill of the loaves followed him, hungry for more. He told them, "Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life." That's a word for me as I return to work. And for you, too, who are working and living every day. Before you say good-bye to summer, ask yourself this: How am

I going to stop hankering after food that perishes? Where am I going to get the food that endures for eternal life?

Jesus is the bread of life and whoever comes to him will never be hungry. Whoever consumes him, whoever takes him into their very being, will never crave anything else. When you eat this bread and drink this cup, remember that God created the whole universe through Christ, through the Word, as it says in John 1: "...All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being." And that means that everything that is, every minute bit of matter, every living thing, every cell in every body already bears the imprint of Christ. Before we are ever baptized or come to this table, we have Christ in us. All of us. The only problem is that we don't know that. In too many bodies and souls, Christ is there, but he is languishing there, starving for our attention.

Over these past five weeks, Jesus got my attention. I asked for the renewal time because I realized that the Christ in me was hungry and needed to be fed. What about the Christ in you?

I invite you to the Lord's Supper, not just so that Jesus can feed you, but so that you can feed the Jesus in you. Jesus in Matthew says, "Wherever two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." [18:20] So when we come to the table, we are, in a sense, feeding the Christ that is in us with the Christ that is among us.

Let us pray. God, we are so stuffed with the food that perishes that we don't even know how deep is our hunger for the food that endures for eternal life. Give us your Bread of Life. Make Jesus real for somebody today. Let the doubter believe that you already love them. Let the skeptic be convinced that the living Christ is already in them. Let the burned-out feel the passion of the Holy Spirit that is smoldering inside them. Let them know that summer may be almost over but you are a God for all seasons and there is always time to feed on Christ and be filled. Amen.

