

## Proper 14B + 12th Sun after Pentecost + Aug 12, 2018

1 Kings 19:4-8 • Psalm 34:1-8 • Ephesians 4:25-5:2 • John 6: 35, 41-51

The Rev. Dorian Del Priore

Poet Naomi Shihab Nye wrote a short story about an encounter she had in the airport in Albuquerque. She found herself wandering the airport due to a 4 hour flight delay. She heard an announcement: “If anyone in the vicinity of Gate A-4 understands any Arabic, please come to the gate immediately.” That was Naomi’s gate, so she went there.

An older woman in full traditional Palestinian embroidered dress, just like her grandmother wore, was crumpled to the floor, wailing. “Help,” said the gate agent. “Talk to her. What is her problem? We told her the flight was going to be late and she did this.”

Naomi stooped down, embraced the woman, and spoke to her in broken Arabic. Familiar words abated the tears. She thought the flight had been cancelled. She needed to be in El Paso the next day for a major medical treatment. Naomi assured the woman she would get there.

She called the woman’s son, who was to pick her, and explained the situation. They called the woman’s other sons. Naomi called her dad and let the woman speak Arabic with him, and they learned they had 10 mutual friends. On a whim, she called a few Palestinian poets she knew and let the woman talk to them as well.

The woman was laughing by then, talking about her life and answering questions. She patted Naomi’s knee. The woman then pulled out a sack of homemade mamool cookies – little powdered sugar crumbly mounds stuffed with dates and nuts – and she began offering them to all the women waiting at the gate. Not a single traveler declined.

Naomi says it was like a sacrament.

“The traveler from Argentina, the mom from California, the lovely woman from Laredo— [they] were all covered with the same powdered sugar. And smiling. There is no better cookie.”<sup>1</sup>

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Sacraments are signs that speak to a deeper truth. They are outward and visible signs of an inward and spiritual grace. Sacraments are physical, experienced signs that not only point to God’s movement and grace at work in us, but also become the very vehicle of that grace at work.

Simply and beautifully, St. Augustine said that a sacrament is a “visible word.”

Visible words give depth and meaning where simple words fail. Visible words embody grace for an embodied people. We are visual, physical people, and thus God speaks to us through tangible symbols that overflow with meaning.

Further, Augustine said, “the word comes to the element and so there is a sacrament.”

Jesus, the Word made flesh, comes to these elements (water, wine, and bread), and these simple, common elements become a sacrament. These elements are flooded with the divine. The common drips with the sacred. Holiness covers us as the water splashes over our heads. The sacred covers us like powdered sugar when the bread is broken. The divine fills us as we eat and drink of the fullness of Jesus. It is in and through these elements that Jesus is made known to us.

Sacraments are a lived experience. Sacraments are the Word, the Good News, experienced in water, bread, and wine,...tangible, visible words shared in community. Sacraments are life broken open, poured out, and shared in relationship. Those mamool cookies were a sign of grace received for the woman at the airport. Her crushing lonely despair was transformed into relief, joy, and relationship. She shares her grace, leaving everyone covered with a grace of powdered sugar.

Strangely enough, the sixth chapter of John is wrought with confusion and misunderstanding, much like that at the airport gate.

Some of the people who experienced the multiplication of loaves and fish wanted to make Jesus to be their king, by force even. They wanted the Word to be something it was not intended to be. They coveted the miracle and the power instead of looking to where the sign pointed. They were attracted to Jesus for the wrong reasons.

They wanted power. They wanted insurrection. They wanted a military leader. They wanted a worldly king. They wanted to craft and shape the divine Word into a god of their own design. Jesus was having none of that. He quickly saw these people had missed the point.

When Jesus critiques and rejects their notion of kingship, he is reframing for the crowds what it means for a king to reign. The Kingdom of God is not about power or lording over the people. And so, the people gathered respond to the critique of Jesus by questioning who he is and where he is from, as if it discounts what he is saying.

Jesus did not leave us rules to follow. He didn't give us a well-crafted thesis or a set of rubrics. Jesus didn't say what all this means. Instead, Jesus gave us bread and wine. Visible words of bread and wine.

Jesus said, "I am the bread of life." Jesus is the bread that gives life to the world. Jesus gives life to the world. Broken bread, poured out wine...this is what gives new life, fuller relationships. And so, he left us this symbol of that life giving grace that is bread and wine. It is in bread and wine that we come to understand his life, death, and resurrection.

And what's remarkable about this? Jesus doesn't explain how this all works and what it means. Instead, he invites you to experience this movement of this grace through these visible words. We come to know, deep in our very bones, about this life giving grace through experiencing these visible words of bread and wine in community.

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You may have heard me teach or talk about the Four Fold Ordo of the Eucharist:  
Take. Bless. Break. Give.

We take the elements, or receive them. Bread and wine. These are gifts offered to God, and they are made from God's creation. We bless it. Really, we ask for God's blessing. We pray for the Holy Spirit to bless it. We pray that Jesus will come to these elements and be present in a particular way. We pray for this because Jesus promised to be present in our gathering. We break it. We break the bread to remember how Christ's body was broken, to remember his sacrifice. We give it. These visible words, common yet sacred elements, are shared in a remarkable way. We share a table and a common cup. We are bound together by Jesus in this shared meal and ritual. We are strengthened by Jesus, healed by Jesus, through his presence.

And what's remarkable is that what happens to the elements happens to us as well. We are taken by God, blessed by God, broken open by God, and then given to the world. We are sent out into the world to be visible words ourselves. We are to become a sacramental witness of grace in movement.

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It has been 8 years since I participated in the Johns Island Home Works Mission. Sleeping on an air-mattress in a gym with 125 of my new closest friends. Manual labor in SC low-country heat and humidity. Teenagers with power tools. And then I learned that I was appointed the construction professional on my job-site. Boy, did they greatly overestimated my capabilities?! I won't say the word *dread* accurately described my feelings, but I was anxious, a little nervous.

But I quickly found myself surround by grace and swimming in mercy.

I have been volunteering with Home Works for nearly 10 years, and I never cease to be struck and wounded by the condition of the homes. I also never cease to be amazed by what a group of young people, with guidance and direction, can do with hammers, crowbars, nails, ladders, and power tools. These ordinary tools and common construction supplies become instruments of grace, sacramental signs of God's love: A new roof that prevents it from raining on the inside of the home; new subflooring that gives a measure of stability and safety to move through bedrooms and bathrooms; new entry stairs that allow homeowners to safely enter their home. Visible words of God's grace. Tangible signs of hope and love.

Two stories stand out to me.

The first: as we ripped apart the old, rotting deck, our homeowner asked us to set aside the spindles. He thought he might ask someone to make a bench for him out of them. A couple of the kiddos looked at the spindles and protested quietly. They knew these spindles couldn't be reused. As they set aside the spindles, someone wondered outloud: *Can we build a new bench? Could we purchase him a new one that will last a long time?*

This was a gift of a different grace. Not simply of mercy, but a gift that is the joy of a simple pleasure. The kiddos had made a connection with the homeowner in such a way, they heard, recognized, and acted on this modest hope. Grace through the ordinary.

The second: among my work crew was a youth, about 15 years old, who had to go off his ADHD meds for the summer. [I'll call him John] He was a good kid, hard worker, task oriented...but John was also wide open, acted without thinking, no filter, constantly moving, and...exhausting. While working on the front deck, he had been a little out of control and was pretty disrespectful to the other adult on our team. Later that night, during our evening devotion, we were to reflect on where we saw God that day, someone who deserves a shoutout (or praise), and someone we should apologize to.

John was quick to volunteer to go first. I don't remember if he skipped the first, but he quickly looked at Jan and said: "I know I was really rude and disrespectful today, and I'm really sorry." He also gave Jan his shoutout, thanking her for watching after everyone's safety and being a part of the team. These visible words of grace poured out through the room and inspired everyone on the team to extend apologies big and small to one another. Many in the room gave shoutouts to Jan as well, showering her with unexpected grace. It was stunning and moving. The room was filled with tears and laughter. A few days earlier, we hardly knew one another. On that day, we became more fully the Body of Christ, broken open for one another.

It is amazing and encouraging that God works through such simple and ordinary to accomplish God's mission in the world. Through flawed priests, exhausted parents, searching young adults, underappreciated teachers, overworked professionals, ADHD teenagers, and the many folk like you and me...that God would choose the many unlikely candidates to convey to the world the visible words of God's grace is miraculous and inspiring.

In what ways are you a *visible word*?

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St. Paul urges us to pursue a life that is worthy of our calling, our Baptism: a life of humility, gentleness, and patience. A life that gives grace, builds up, is kind, tenderhearted, and forgiving. Paul implores us to bear one another in love, to be imitators of God, to live in love.

This is the Kingdom of God that Jesus is pointing the crowds towards: A kingdom marked by bread that gives life when it is broken open. The Kingdom of God is about the shared life.

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Naomi found herself holding the woman's hand. She noticed that the woman had a small potted plant in her bag. It was a medicinal plant with furry green leaves. Apparently, this is an old traveling tradition. Always carry a plant. Always stay rooted to somewhere. Looking around at the late and weary travelers, Naomi thought, this is the world she wants to live in. The shared world.

Like carrying a plant to stay rooted, it is the sacraments that ground us in the Christian faith. The visible words of water, bread, and wine are sacraments of unity in which the people of God are bound up together by grace and peace. This is the life and kingdom that sacraments point us towards: the shared life, a shared kingdom.

Visible words are not things to understand. I can't truly explain to you what they mean. Sacraments, water, bread and wine,...these visible words are known through experience. Relationships, community, and context will shape and transform us as we receive Jesus in the bread and wine. We slowly begin to grasp the sacred nature of bread when we share our lives and cultivate relationships.

The most peculiar and remarkable things happen when we are broken open to the possibilities of the shared life. Sometimes the shared life is in the familiar and expected. But often the shared life happens in unexpected and peculiar spaces with unfamiliar people...like at airports.

Looked for the shared life in the familiar and the unexpected.  
Become the liturgy: taken, blessed, broken, and given.

Allow yourself to be covered by the sacred, like powdered sugar.

Come to the table and eat, my friends.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://davidkanigan.com/2014/11/16/gate-a-4/Nye>, Naomi Shihab. "Gate A-4," Honeybee, NY: Greenwillow Books, 2008.