

Couch Potato Faith
John 14:1-14, Easter 5, Year A
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By The Reverend Barkley Thompson

I have a college friend who, after almost twenty years of too much food, drink, and armchair quarterbacking, is finally trying to get himself in shape. He swears by his new exercise regimen. For others who are trying to get in shape, it might be worth considering. Be careful, though. Moving too quickly through the steps could cause injury. You begin by standing on a comfortable surface where you have plenty of room at each side. With a 5 lb potato sack in each hand, extend your arms straight out from your sides and hold them there as long as you can. Try to reach a full minute, then relax. Each day, you'll find that you can hold this position for just a bit longer. After a couple of weeks, move up to 10 lb potato sacks, then 50 lb potato sacks, and then eventually try to get to where you can lift a 100 lb potato sack in each hand and hold your arms straight for more than a full minute. Only after you feel confident at that level, you can begin to put actual potatoes in each of the sacks.

The potato is an apt symbol, because we are indeed becoming a nation of couch potatoes. According to the Centers for Disease Control, by 2009 in thirty-three of the fifty states over a quarter of the population was clinically obese. A decade earlier, only Mississippi could claim that dubious distinction. In other words, we are becoming more sedentary. Of the seven deadly sins, these days it seems we are particularly susceptible to sloth.

But there are other ways to describe our contemporary malaise, ways that encompass our affection for the sofa, the remote control, and the fast food burger but also go far beyond them. I would argue that the best way to consider this is to think of us as a *passively receptive* culture.

We want the world and our experience of it fed to us. We certainly see this in our entertainment, but we also now find it in the way we ingest complicated world events. One of the best selling news magazines on the market is "The Week," which is designed to cut-and-paste three or four sentences from other periodicals' commentaries and news stories. "The Week" feeds us the headlines and just enough detail to make us dangerous without requiring us to expend mental energy thinking through tough issues.

Even our exercise is not immune. The newest stationary exercise bikes allow us to simulate on a sophisticated view screen a Tour-de-France road race or a slog up a mountainside. Notice the irony: even when exercising, we have come to prefer comfort and ease. Give me air conditioning and virtual reality rather than an actual bike ride in God's creation!

Hollywood has picked up on this trajectory. The 2008 Pixar film *WALL-E* chronicled the fate of humanity eight hundred years in the future, after earth had become so toxically polluted that human beings were forced to leave *terra firma* for the stars. On the space ship, daily life is coordinated by the mega-corporation “Buy-n-Large.” People whiz around on motorized chairs, and their entire perception of the world is given to them via view screens in front of their faces. They are told what to look at, what to eat, what to enjoy, and even what color clothing to wear. It is a spoon-fed existence characterized by voraciously receptive appetites and no exertion of effort. It’s also a caricature uncomfortably close to our reality.

When we look at the contemporary religious landscape, we see something similar. Outside of Christianity, there is the phenomenon of what I would call “smorgasbord spirituality,” in which a person combines a bit of this tradition and a dash of that faith into an unidentifiable religious amalgam. Such a combination, under the guise of enlightened inclusiveness, is actually more indicative of an unwillingness in our religious culture to exert the effort of practice, prayer and study that commitment to any of the ancient religious traditions requires. This is, by the way, hilariously depicted in the movie *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*, when Sarah points out the myriad trendy religious icons tattooed on the torso of her boyfriend, the rock star Aldous Snow. Sarah says, “That is Buddhist; that is Nordic; that is Hindu; and that’s just gibberish. They are completely conflicting ideologies, and that does not make you a citizen of the world!”

Within Christianity, there is the ever-burgeoning mega-church movement, which predicates much of its growth on high levels of entertainment and low levels of commitment. Simple themes coupled with the promise of spiritual return fill seats and fund church coffee bars and yoga gyms, and in some instances a “Communion station” where you can sidle up and order the Sacrament as though it’s an Orange Julius.

But then again, there’s nothing new under the sun. In today’s Gospel, the Risen Jesus, who spent years prior to his Passion showing and teaching the apostles about the way of discipleship, now readies finally to leave them. Almost as he’s out the door, so to speak, Philip grabs the hem of Jesus’ tunic. “Lord, just *show us* the Father,” he says, “and we will be satisfied.” Inert and passive as a stone, Philip wants to be spoon-fed.

Most often when this passage is read, we focus on the first half, in which Jesus says, “Believe in God, believe also in me...I am the way, the truth, and the life.” As eloquent, vital, and essential as those phrases are—and they are—without the later conversation between Jesus and Philip ironically they can lead to just the sort of passively receptive faith we must guard against. Because, you see, it is the later conversation that defines what the very term “belief”

means. It does *not* mean passive assent to a proposition. It is not merely a positive check mark to the question, “Jesus is the Savior of world, true or false?”

Jesus, exasperated, answers Philip, “Have I been with you all this time, and still you do not know me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works... Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do.”

In other words, the very definition of “belief” includes doing the active, vibrant, committed work of Jesus. We come to know what belief is in the doing. Faith is not unlike any other skill, be it carpentry, playing a musical instrument, or fluency in a foreign language. *We become by the doing.* It is nonsensical to call a “dancer” someone who does not dance, and it is equally nonsensical to call someone a Christian who does not walk the way of Jesus.

In his first letter, from which we also read today, the apostle Peter calls upon us to become stones, but he does not mean we are to be passive and inert. “Come to God a *living* stone,” Peter says, “chosen and precious in God’s sight, and like living stones be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.”

These are action verbs, “to be built” and “to offer”! We are to be strong as stone in our dedication and commitment to the way of Jesus. We are, Peter says, “to proclaim the mighty acts of him who called [us] out of darkness into his marvelous light.”

Admittedly, we are winding down our program year. It ends today, as a matter of fact. The summer is an important time for respite for me and for you. But I ask—pointedly—that we each take this passage as our meditation this summer. Pray and ponder (as you continue to come to church all summer!) where and how you are called to be about Gospel work in this place. Come Welcome Sunday in late August, you will hear a clarion call from this pulpit for an engaged and involved parish, a congregation of people who roll up their sleeves for the work of Jesus.

This is, admittedly, a more strenuous way of faith. It requires practice, and study, and prayer, and service. It requires commitment to follow where Jesus leads even when we’d rather not go. It is not the way of being entertained, or spoon-fed, or of picking-and-choosing the bits that go down easy. But it is also the only way of faith that transforms whole lives. It is the way of faith that can grow to lift the 100 lb potato sack, full to overflowing with potatoes. It is the way, the truth, and the life, and we only come to believe it by living it.

Amen.