

5th Sunday after Pentecost (Year B)

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*Acts 20:7-12*

*On the first day of the week, when we met to break bread, Paul was holding a discussion with them; since he intended to leave the next day, he continued speaking until midnight. There were many lamps in the room upstairs where we were meeting. A young man named Eutychus, who was sitting in the window, began to sink off into a deep sleep while Paul talked still longer. Overcome by sleep, he fell to the ground three floors below and was picked up dead. But Paul went down, and bending over him took him in his arms, and said, 'Do not be alarmed, for his life is in him.' Then Paul went upstairs, and after he had broken bread and eaten, he continued to converse with them until dawn; then he left. Meanwhile they had taken the boy away alive and were not a little comforted.*

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I recently returned from a 10 day trip to Italy. The trip was wonderful, despite the terrible food and the mediocre wine. My wife, Tricia, and I were on our honeymoon and spent half of our trip in Rome and then the second half in town called Orvieto while making several day trips around Umbria and Tuscany, from Montipulciano to Assisi. It had been several years since either one of us had left the United States and neither one of us had been to Italy before. Traveling to a new country reminded me of a truth that I suppose we all know but sometimes have a tendency to forget - and that truth is this: God created us as embodied human beings so that we would use all five of our senses to experience the world, to learn and to grow.

Now you and I are going to take a nostalgic trip back to preschool and remind ourselves of the five senses. Why don't you point with me to the respective parts of the body that house the senses? Hearing, seeing, smelling, tasting, and touching. Our ears were made to hear. Our eyes for seeing. Our noses for smelling. Our tongues for tasting. And our entire bodies for touching. The stimulation of any one of these senses sends signals to the brain which creates memories and develops us into the ever-growing humans that we are. It's the way we're wired. It's not rocket science; it's just the way things are supposed to be.

And I was reminded of this truth in terrifically tangible ways while I was overseas just a few months ago.

My sense of touch was stimulated by being cramped in coach seating for a 10 hour flight. I learned with my sense of touch when I drove a little stick shift diesel car around Tuscany with the windows down and the Tuscan wind blowing in my hair and the warm Italian sun bathing my skin.

My sense of hearing was stimulated by listening to the Italian language and by saying "gratzi" when someone said to me, "prego." I listened to the organ in beautiful cathedrals and to Italian cooks bickering and bantering back and forth. I listened to our driver, Enrico, and our tour guide, Massimo, as they ushered us around Rome.

My sense of seeing was stimulated by looking up at the epic oculus of the Pantheon or the massive structure of the Coliseum or the beauty of the Sistine Chapel or the wide landscapes of the rolling hills of Tuscany. The intense purple of the Lavender was a shade that I'm not sure I've seen before in my time.

Speaking of lavender, my sense of smell certainly did not go wanting. My nose inhaled the deep aroma of the flowers, the olive oil, the espresso, the wine, the fresh mountain air of the Tuscan hills.

And my sense of taste - oh dear God almighty, don't get me started on all the work my sense of taste had to do while we were there. Wine, pasta, gelato, espresso, wine, tiramisu, caprese salad, wine, and - did I mention wine?

And now that I sufficiently have all of our minds daydreaming and our mouths watering, it's time to get back to the sermon!

We learn best by using all of our five senses and do you know who knows that best? Children!

Children are little sponges who whose job it is to soak up as much information and stimulation as possible. For a child, the world is one big wonderland full of curiosities and potential new discoveries.

Let's do a little experiment here...for those of you who have ever helped raise children, please raise your hand if, during that period, you ever said the following statement, "don't touch that!" How about "take that out of your mouth this very instant?" Children don't touch everything and try to eat *everything* because they are annoying, don't know any better, or are stupid! Children touch everything and try to eat everything because they are trying to *learn!* It's really as simple as that. Children are masters at doing their best to exercise all five of their senses. And, truth be told, adults learn the exact same way; we just have a nasty habit of forgetting that.

So why is it then, if we were wired by God to use all five of our senses, that so often our ways of worship only appeal to one or maybe two? Perhaps, if you're anything like me, you might notice that many of our worship services tend to focus almost exclusively on the sense of hearing. We come, we listen to music, we speak the call to worship, we listen to scripture, we sing, we sit, we listen to a long sermon, we listen to some more music, we sing, and then we leave. There is little smelling, or seeing, or touching, or tasting (with the notable exception of Communion).

Perhaps we can be at least a little comforted by the fact that this does not appear to be a new problem. In fact, today's passage from the book of Acts is a bizarre tale that reminds us that some things never change. And some things need to.

Brevity was never the Apostle Paul's strong suit. If you have any doubt of that, read the book of Romans. He was a long winded preacher who who had the uncanny ability of fitting about 15 sermons into one. In the early days of the Christian movement, we are told, Paul was preaching in an upper room after dinner. It was a hot, stuffy room and they were listening to a long sermon. So what happened? People started dozing off. Now, I realize we too are in a warm room listening to a sermon so no one get any ideas!

We are told there was a young man named Eutychus who made the unfortunate decision to sit by a window while Paul spoke well until midnight. Now, when you are sitting in a stuffy room listening to a cranky old preacher gone on and on and on, sitting next to a window has one distinct advantage and one distinct disadvantage. One the one hand, sitting next to a window provided a nice cross breeze to get some fresh air in a day well before the advent of air conditioning. On the other hand, sitting next to a window while fighting off sleep and boredom runs the risk of falling out of said window and dying. Unfortunately for our young friend, Eutychus, this is *exactly* what happened to him. He falls asleep and falls out of a third-story window to the street below.

Now, I imagine half of the people in the room were quite alarmed that one of the young had just fallen out of a window and died. I also imagine that the other half were quite relieved that the sermon came to an abrupt end. At any rate, they all rush outside to check on the condition of poor Eutychus. Paul, with perhaps a hint of annoyance in his voice for being interrupted, tells everyone to chill out, he takes Eutychus in his arms and revives him.

Now, one might think that a normal person would take this incident as a divine sign to “call it a night.” Paul, it seemed, did not get that divine memo. Instead, he gathers people back into the room and they go until dawn!

Friends, the message of the Gospel, the grace of God that we proclaim is a *really BIG message!* God’s love is a truth that is so wonderful, so incredibly awesome that it cannot be communicated by words alone. Now, don’t get me wrong, sermons are important; I’m preaching one right now. But so many of our churches have become so obsessed with the sermon that the rest of the service seems like one big monotonous motion that we have to get through to get to the “important stuff.” Here are some concrete ways that we can engage all of our senses in worship in ways that help all of us, especially children, experience the grace of God and to share it everywhere:

Here’s a great way to engage our sense of taste! Practice communion whenever possible, eat the bread, drink the cup, and - no matter what you do - don’t ever, *ever* prevent children of *any* age from partaking in it. Have bread and juice left over afterwards? Have the children gather around the Table after the service to have some more. There’s plenty of God’s abundance to go around!

Here’s a great way to engage our sense of smell! Next time your church has communion, set up a couple of bread making machines in the corners of the sanctuary and bake bread during the service so the entire room smells like fresh bread. After the service is finished, take that bread to the homebound or the sick.

Here’s a great way to engage our sense of touch! Don’t just use the baptismal font when you have a baptism. Use it every Sunday! Come up to the font and place your hands in the water. Feel the cool, refreshing feeling of the water as it reminds you that you are loved by God and God’s grace washes away your sins.

Here’s a great way to engage our sense of sight! Don’t just read a passage; draw it! Pass out pieces of paper and have children (and adults for that matter) doodle during worship. Or how about a member or members of the congregation make new banners for the liturgical seasons. Or how about watching water being poured into the font?

There are *so* many different ways to learn and not everyone learns the same way. Therefore, our worship of God should reflect God’s diversity and the diverse ways that God created us to learn and engage one another. You and I must save Eutychus again and again and welcome more to the Table to not just “hear” the Good News, but to see it, to taste it, to smell it, and to touch it.

And so, with your permission, I’m going to do something that Paul couldn’t do: I’m going to end this sermon.

Worship is a gift, a wonderful practice of exploration where we taste and see that the Lord is Good.

The God who calls us to worship is creative and creating. Perhaps we should learn from Eutychus and grow in new ways to make our worship of that God equally creative.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen!