John 6:35

Jesus said to them, ‘I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.

The High Diving Club

We all experience rites of passage in life. One of those rites involves jumping off the high diving board. If you’re like me, you learned at a community pool, where lots of people, especially children, hung out in the warm days of summer. And you remember there are usually two low diving boards on either side of a high diving board. Little kids like me would go through a ritual in which we would attempt all sorts of strange poses and postures as we would run or bounce off the end of the low diving board. And when we felt that not enough people were paying attention to our buffoonery, we would attempt to make big splashes strategically aimed at sunbathers near the diving boards – you might remember the infamous “cannonball” or the slight modification called “the can opener.”

Well, we kids could not help but notice that more attention was given to, and the splashes were more humongous coming from the kids jumping off the high diving board. Even we low-diving-board prima donnas would surrender our attention to those on the high-diving-board, which stood out like the Olympic gold medal platform, high and center. There was a tangible air of coolness surrounding any guy who jumped off of that board, and every low-diving-board boy knew that the center board was his destiny.

There were a couple obstacles that prevented us from simply getting in line to go off the high board. First, there was a long distance between the end of the board and the water. Even though you were pretty sure that the water below the high board was no harder than that below the low boards, you knew what a belly flop felt like off the low board and you had learned enough in science class to know that the same belly approaching a body of water at a higher velocity would likely produce more tears. Second, there were always lines at community pool high diving boards, lines of people who moved at a brisk and steady pace, lines of people that would grow impatient if someone failed to exit the high diving platform in the traditional manner (i.e. jumping off of it). You could get out of the line at ground level with no social repercussions, but once you started climbing that ladder, *there was no turning back!* There were a few who would back down the ladder from halfway up with minimal repercussions, but once you reached the top, you were live and on stage, and though you were too frightened to look, you know that everyone and their grandmother were watching you. You just knew it. You were now expected to perform, and to back down the ladder was to place your whole future in jeopardy. You had a lot to think about before getting in that line.

At some point in our young lives we decide that it is time. With slight trepidation we get in line. With great trepidation we start to climb that ladder. With unspeakable terror, we reach the top of the ladder and find that your worst fears are realized. You’re alone, and you don’t even want to look for the people lounging safely on the sides of the pool. That diving board looks twice as long and half as wide as it did from ground level. And that safety rail is mighty short; there must be at least five feet between the end of the rail and the end of the board, five feet that you must must traverse with nothing to hold onto. And off the end of that board all you see is sky. Then you make the mistake of looking down...and all these thoughts are rushing through your mind as your whole life flashes before your eyes, only to be interrupted by the guy behind you on the ladder saying, “Hey kid. Hurry up!” And then comes the moment of truth – you’d like to close your eyes, but you can’t for fear that you’re going to run the wrong direction off the board, so you look straight at the sky in front of you, and run, screaming like a banshee, off the end of the board, then flail through the air into the water, over to the edge of the pool, and it’s official. You are now a man! The world looks different to you now, because you are now a high-diving-board person.

The reason I bring up this event is that we have spiritual rites of passage as well, and becoming a Christian is quite similar to jumping off a high diving board. You may think that being a Christian is an identity you’re born with. You grow up in the church, take a few classes, endure a few ceremonies, and voila! You’re a Christian. Or you simply join a church, making a few promises about loving and serving God, and you’re in. But I question whether people who stop attending church consider themselves to be Christian, and I wonder often about those who *do* come to church regularly. Did you know that John Wesley was a pastor for ten years before he thought of himself as a true Christian? We all may have different definitions of “Christian”, but if I asked you, “Do you feel spiritually filled?” what would you answer? Jesus says, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me shall not hunger; whoever believes in me shall not thirst?” Do you come to church because you are spiritually hungry or thirsty? Do you come like David or the psalmist, recognizing that something is askew and wishing that God would just take out your old heart and give you a new, clean one instead?

Jesus says that all we have to do is take the dive. “I am the bread of life. Partake of me and you will never be hungry again.” All we have to do is follow him, believe in him. But we assess what’s involved in following Jesus, in partaking of that bread of life, and we feel we’re not ready. Our goals and aspirations for ourselves are not in sync with what God’s goals and aspirations are for us, and we’re afraid to go in the direction that he might lead us – after all, look where Jesus landed. We can be generous by our own standards, but we’re afraid to be generous by God’s standards. We can give what we are willing, but not necessarily what God asks us to give. The Bible tells the story of a rich young man who came to Jesus asking him what he must do to gain eternal life. Jesus told him, “Go sell everything you have, give the money to the poor, and come follow me.” Well the rich young man left very sad. He could not eat the bread of life. That ladder looked too high, the jump was too dangerous. He wasn’t ready to jump off the high diving board. And so he went away, sad, still hungering and thirsting for the bread of life that he was too afraid to consume.

That sounds crazy, doesn’t it? To be hungry for something that you’re afraid to eat. Kind of like a child trying to get up the nerve to go off that high diving board. He knows that he wants to jump off that high platform, but he’s also afraid of the prospect. But until you do follow Christ, until you do taste the bread of life, you will have that nagging feeling inside telling you, “I have to do this. I’m tired of NOT jumping off the high diving board. I’m tired of being hungry.

One thing the church can do is to be patient with him. We’ve all been low-diving-board people before. We’ve experienced the fear. But now that we’re going off the high diving board we can encourage the new kid in line. We can give him confidence, and tell him how to avoid doing a belly flop. This is what Paul means by “bearing one another in love.” We can give him a little time on that top platform instead of saying, “Hey kid. Hurry up!”

Most of us are here because of our hunger. We haven’t figured out quite how to handle the pitches that life throws at us. We have fears and grudges and greed and lusts and deceit. We may not be criminals, but there are things about us that we’re not so proud of. And we come because we are conscious of those issues, but we are not ready to give them all over to God. We’re not ready to eat this bread that Jesus offers us. We want all the benefits that come with having a clean heart, but we don’t want God to actually perform the transplant.

This is why the Church has such a hard time maintaining the Spirit of unity that Paul urges us to have. There are always some in the church who “lead a life worthy of the estate to which (they) have been called,” who “with all humility and gentleness, with patience, (bear) with one another in love.” But others cannot, and so there are divisions between churches and within churches.

But in spite of all the division, all of our failures to live a life worthy of the title “Christian”, it is no coincidence that it is the bread that keeps us together. Jesus comes to us, a broken people, a broken church, in a broken world, and he offers us his body, *broken for us.* And so today we come to *his* table, humbly and broken, yet hopeful, knowing that God has deemed us worthy not through our own deeds but through the sacrifice of his own son, the bread of life that was broken for us. May today’s communion be a time of profound introspection. May you consider the gift that God has given us in Jesus Christ, is this bread and in this cup. And may this truly be the bread of life for us, given *freely* for us, in order that we may never hunger again.