

July 24, 2016
Tenth Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 12, Year C, RCL
The Rev. Keri T. Aubert
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Hosea 1:2-10
Psalm 85
Colossians 2:6-15, 16-19
Luke 11:1-13

I noticed recently that I have been eating an inordinate amount of ice cream this summer.

I could blame my ice cream consumption on the proximity of excellent homemade ice cream: I live a half-mile from both Ashley's and Cherry on Top, Wentworth's is just down the road, and it would be a shame not to frequent these local businesses. I could blame it on the grocers: Stop & Shop places Ben & Jerry's at the end of the one freezer case I routinely walk by, and it would be foolish to pass up a sale price of two pints for six dollars. I could blame it on the influence of others: our daughter loves ice cream, and it would be mean to refuse ice cream to a child home for the summer, even if she is a 21-year-old college student. I could even blame it on the weather: this summer has been especially hot and sultry, and it would be silly to pass up a cool, refreshing treat.

Proximity and cheap prices and my daughter and incessant heat provide great excuses for my ice cream habit, but I doubt any of them is its cause. Rather, I am weak-willed when it comes to ice cream, and I am especially weak-willed during times of adversity. Bad news and ice cream go cone-in-hand for me. Most likely, this has been a summer of ice cream because it has been a summer of bad news. We are firmly into the dog days of summer, and this summer has been metaphorically one of the doggiest I can remember.

The term "dog days" has been in use since ancient Greek and Roman times. It comes from the so-called "dog star," Sirius, which is the brightest star in the constellation Canis Major, or Large Dog. Sirius is actually the brightest star in the entire night sky. In ancient times, though not now, during the hottest part of the year, Sirius rose near the time the sun rose. The combination was deduced to be particularly potent. According to a text dating from 1812, ancient peoples believed the star Sirius to be "the cause of the hot sultry weather usually experienced at its appearance." The author of that text observes that the ancients "would seem to have believed its power of heat, combined with that of the sun, to have been so excessive that on the morning of its first rising, the Sea boiled, the Wine turned sour, Dogs grew mad, and all other creatures became languid; causing to man, among other diseases, burning fevers, hysterics, and phrenzies."¹

Despite their lack of modern science, the ancients may have been on to something. This summer, "burning fevers, hysterics, and phrenzies" are in the news practically every day. No wonder I'm eating so much ice cream. A scoop of ice cream is an orb of richly sweet relief. Ice cream may be the only thing keeping me from "phrenzies" of my own.

Whether or not the Dog Star has anything to do with it, it feels to me as if we are living through an important moment in the history of our nation and of our world. I would hazard a guess that the people gathered here right now are very well informed about all that. But we have to be careful. Things are very different from my childhood, when bad news was delivered, once to all, by the calm and dignified Walter Cronkite. The newspaper came the next day, to be consumed over a calm and leisurely cup of coffee.

Today we have access to addictingly infinite servings of news and information and opinion, much of it on endless and “phrenzied” cable television repeat. If I ate that much ice cream, I could not afford my mortgage payment. Too much news makes just about anyone feel discouraged and hopeless. It’s not so different from the malaise I would feel if I ate a gallon of ice cream. The key for us is to find a balance: we have to consume enough news to be fully engaged, but not so much that our only relief comes if we dis-engage.

In today’s gospel reading, a disciple says to Jesus, “Lord, teach us to pray.” It seems to be an innocent question. At this point in Luke, there is no particular trouble or distress. Jesus has been teaching and healing. The seventy have returned from their first mission trip with the enthusiasm of teenagers. All in all, things are going well. Things are going well, and *still* Jesus prays. Maybe that’s why the disciple is so curious. Maybe, as for many of us, prayer comes more easily to him when things are going wrong.

You may be familiar with the writer Ann Lamott. I enjoy her writing because she is so honest about the ups and downs of her spiritual journey. Her roller-coaster of a path makes mine look like a kiddie ride. Lamott says there are three basic prayers: *help*, *thanks*, and *wow*. I think that’s basically right, and I appreciate the simplification. There are times when one word is enough, since God knows what is in our hearts anyway. Here’s the complication: on our lips and in our heart, I am pretty sure that we are much more practiced with *help* than we are with *thanks* or *wow*.

Back to Jesus and the disciple, who says, “Lord, teach us to pray.” In reply to the disciple’s question, Jesus offers what we know as the Lord’s Prayer.

Most of us learned the Lord’s Prayer as children. We know it so well that we can say it without actually paying attention to the words. Our mouths keep moving even if our mind is elsewhere. While in principle we should be paying attention, maybe that’s okay, because it means the Lord’s Prayer is buried so deep in our brains as to be a part of us.

There has been information in the news recently about something called *epigenetics*. Epigenetics supposes that external or environmental factors turn gene expression on or off. Along with the gene itself, this gene expression may be heritable. I first learned about epigenetics in relation to Jewish survivors of the Holocaust: their children seem to be inheriting the effects of their parents’ trauma.² All that made me wonder whether epigenetics has positive as well as negative possibilities. I don’t know whether that’s true, but it makes sense to me that living in a positive environment is good for us epigenetically, and we pass that on to our children.

That raises all sorts of questions about the multigenerational effect of privilege and poverty. But for this sermon, I'll only say that, epigenetically and otherwise, I'm pretty sure that the Lord's Prayer is better for us and for our children than is Fox News. That's true especially if we understand the Lord's Prayer in the context of the *rest of* today's gospel reading. In the reading, Jesus offers not only prayer instruction, but also reassurance of God's infinite lovingkindness. There is a lot of *help* in the Lord's Prayer, and there's a lot more, especially because the context of today's gospel reading leads directly to *thanks* and *wow*.

Here's an interesting (at least to me) church factoid from the Church of England, our mother church. In two of the three earliest versions of its *Book of Common Prayer*, those of 1552 and 1559, the church calendar includes dates for the beginning and end of "dog daies," which ran roughly from mid-July to early September. Maybe we should put dog days back on the church calendar, especially during election years. I imagine what observing dog days might look like, and maybe it looks like this: During July and August, every time we reach for the ice cream cone, or the cold beer, or the TV remote, or whatever thing we use to get by, we also say the Lord's Prayer, *and* we think of it in the context of today's gospel reassurance of God's infinite lovingkindness. As we consume the ice cream or the beer or the program, we also consume the Lord's Prayer and the reassurance that goes with it. I think it *does* have the power to change our brains and our selves, in ways that will ultimately change the hurting world around us.

Notes

¹ John Brady, *Clavis Calendaria; or, A Compendious Analysis of the Calendar, Illustrated with Ecclesiastical, Historical, and Classical Anecdotes*, vol. II, 80-81, available online from the Internet Archive at <https://archive.org/stream/claviscalendaria02braduoft#page/80/mode/2up> (accessed July 23, 2016).

² See, for example, Tori Rodriguez, "Descendants of Holocaust Survivors Have Altered Stress Hormones," *Scientific American*, March 1, 2015, available online at <http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/descendants-of-holocaust-survivors-have-altered-stress-hormones/> (accessed July 23, 2016).