

Trust your heart!

*A sermon by the Rev. Shana M. P. McCauley
Preached at St. James', Tigard*

I grew up in a trailer in a seedier part of Anchorage, Alaska. We weren't poverty-stricken, but money was certainly tight. One February, when it was particularly cold, our furnace went out, and we didn't have \$1200 to replace it. For the better part of a year, I slept in the living room because my bedroom was too small to safely turn on a space heater. In the mornings, I remember my dad reading the newspaper in front of the oven with the door open for heat. Another time, the floor around our only toilet rotted out and we had to use a bucket for nearly a week until we could afford to have it fixed.

Having come from that, by this time last year, I was practically a poster child for the American Dream. In 2006, I graduated from seminary and was ordained. I loved working as a parish priest. You know, they say some Christians are sprinklers, sprinkle a little water, sprinkle a little rice, sprinkle a little dirt, and I did them all, I baptized, married and buried people. I blessed a baby only hours old. Everyday for a month, I visited a woman in her 90s in the ICU. Every time I visited, I gave her unction, believing it would be the last time. And I just got word that she is still alive today! I did Vacation Bible School with 200 participants, and I took a group of youth to rebuild houses in New Orleans. I delighted with people in the good times, and cried with them in the harder times. And I loved it.

Meanwhile, my husband Ryan finally found meaningful work in a field that he hoped to work the rest of his life. He worked with underprivileged children at the Boys and Girl's club. He played with them and loved them, and they loved him back.

Personally, about two years into marriage, Ryan and I had experienced a few losses, so when we learned in May that I was pregnant again, we were cautiously ecstatic. In August, we learned that our child was a boy – all of the sudden, simply finding out his gender made it feel a lot more real that we were going to have a baby. and For the first time, we allowed ourselves to truly celebrate. We started to prepare our little house in the suburbs for Killian's arrival.

After a humble upbringing, I had earned a Master's Degree, was ordained, married, expecting my son, was saving money, had a couple of dogs, and a great little house in the suburbs. It was us and apple pie as they say.

In October of last year, just as I was turning the corner into my third trimester, I awoke from my so-called American Dream. Facing major budget shortfalls, the vestry voted to eliminate my position. Like so many others, I lost my job. The job market wasn't exactly hopping, especially not for a pregnant woman. As if that weren't enough, on December 19, my husband lost his job too.

This life that we'd spent years building took only months to unravel. The proverbial "they" would tell you straight up, we were *not* living the American Dream any longer.

For two years, I had preached faith from the pulpit, and now, my own was being put to the test. Jesus said, "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me and I in them." I'm eating and drinking Jesus!!!

And it is in that moment that I really felt what the disciples were saying, “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?” I wanna accept it, I really do, but, really Jesus, could it be that simple? Eat, drink, abide? But is it really that simple?

Do you know why we exchange the Peace? Think about it in these terms. Think about Thanksgiving dinner. Have you ever gone to Thanksgiving dinner when there is tension in the family? This is, of course, a scene from many a movie – there is the big conflicted yet outwardly jovial family, in festive holiday sweaters, drawn together out of tradition and obligation. It’s uncomfortable, even if you’re merely watching it on TV. Communion is Thanksgiving Dinner. If there is tension among members, then it is uncomfortable. We exchange the Peace as a way to reconcile our relationships with one another before we break bread; we are making peace so that we may eat our symbolic meal together at ease. This way, we come together around the table, tension free, as a group of people who love one another without pause. Sometimes life is good, and that’s easy to do. Sometimes my cup runs over with love for those around me. But that’s not always true. In fact, there are a lot of times when it isn’t. And so, we put this in, as a staple of each service. A time to say Peace, a prayer for unity, and we go through the motions, hoping that most times, we are truly forgiving and forgiven. Loving and loved.

Once again, we are reminded that Jesus came that we might love each other with clear hearts. Not making check lists and trying to find fault in ourselves and one another, but freely, openly. Jesus knows that we are equipped to do the right thing without rules – look into your heart! Are you loving yourself and each other as well as you are able? Then you are already following the rules. Drink this, eat this, abide in me and I will in you.

Come together, break bread and drink wine with easy hearts, because when we love and are loved, life is best. It isn’t about the law and it isn’t about rules, we know in our hearts when we’re right with the world. This was hard for the law-abiding Jews to hear, but what Jesus came to say was essentially – forget the law! Trust your hearts!!

The Jewish laws were really intended to make the people live in right relationship with one another, but what was going on in Jesus’ time was that there were some who were living to the letter of the law, and showing off. Seeeeee how pious I am, I give 10 percent of my income. Seeeeee how good I am, I keep kosher perfectly, and if there’s ever a question, I err on the side of not possibly breaking kosher. Jesus came along and said, look into your hearts and ask yourselves, does this matter? Does it really make a difference to God if you wear mixed blend clothing or whether or not you accidentally eat a bug? Through Jesus, we are freed from these somewhat trivial issues, so that we might see the bigger picture – am I in right relationship with God and my fellow kind today? How can I do better?

Through our situation, our family has been somewhat freed from the trivial too. Yeah, it’s pretty ... I’ll be polite and say “unfortunate,” that we lost our jobs, home, health insurance, etc. But you know what? Life still ain’t all that bad! We have a beautiful baby and the love of one another. We are so very blessed to have been taken in by family, and have a wonderful living situation – truly the best I could hope for short of being independent. So far, we have had just enough to live on, though at times we have to scrape. We have never had to worry about being homeless or going hungry. It’s not the American Dream, but when we get real, in our heart of hearts, we know that life is pretty darn good.

On my lesser days, I'm consumed by what I think my life is supposed to be, and I'm irritated that God isn't making that happen. I want the Jesus that I'm trying to abide in to abide in a certain way. Unfortunately, Jesus and that wacky Holy Spirit, they don't work like that. Abiding in Jesus means going on a long journey, sometimes knowing where we're going, and often not. It means getting dusty and spending time with people who don't look or think like us. It means pain and at times unimaginable sacrifice. It means giving up checklists like the American Dream, and knowing that real success is immeasurable, and felt in the heart.

On my better days, and I'm certainly not saying that's all of them, I can remember that "the American Dream," whatever that is, is a construct, something of an illusion. In truth, its relationship with my happiness is what I make it. Determining what is enough for me and my family is really my right, and mine alone. Would I like to get back on that road toward financial independence? You bet. But if I trust my heart, I know that life right now ain't so bad neither.