

Repetition.

Repetition creates long term memory by eliciting strong chemical interactions between the neurons in your brain. It's no wonder that our brains seem to jump into action when we hear a repeated word, phrase, or story. We try to place where we have heard it before and gauge its level of importance all in order to file it away as something we need to remember or just a random fact.

Repetition is a consistent part of our lives. We have professors, colleagues and friends repeat information and stories to us all the time. We ourselves also repeat often.

Recently I have repeatedly been introducing myself as I have transitioned into a new city, school, and job. I'll repeat myself now. For those of you I haven't had the privilege of meeting yet, my name is Bailey Kimmel and I have the honor of being one of your seminarians for the year. I am going into my second year at Virginia Theological Seminary, and I am originally from the Philadelphia area. Because I am new to the area, I am repeatedly asked what school I attend, by those not involved in the Episcopal Church, the follow up questions are what is that? What are you going for? And how does that work? The repetition has the potential to grow tedious. I am sure many of you are familiar with introducing yourself at a party so many times you lose count. Or hearing the same story from a family member or friend for the 500th time. We might grumble through it or roll our eyes, but something happens to us every time we hear that story again. Maybe you hear something in the story you didn't know before. Or maybe you have more confidence when you explain your new job title or what you do in

“tech”. In my case I have noticed that every time I explain why I moved to Arlington, VA people’s following questions have become less about why I am going to school for Theology and more questions about Christianity, my views and opinions on different theological concepts, and statements about their own spiritual journey and were they find themselves.

Most recently I was at work, I have been working at a veterinary hospital for the summer and decided to take my lunch in one of the exam rooms with a couple of other coworkers. While we were eating, one person looked at me and said, “what is your background and what are you currently doing, I have been meaning to ask for a while.” I proceeded to my well-rehearsed lines of going to school, studying theology and my aspirations to become an Episcopal priest. The co-worker observing this interaction immediately perked up and informed me that there was something different in this rendition of the story that I had been missing previously. So much so that following my well-rehearsed personal elevator pitch a lively conversation about Church, what it really means to follow Jesus, and inquiries about what heaven and hell really are followed suite. I am not a 100% sure what changed between one repetition and the next, but the effects could be felt both externally by my coworker’s reactions and internally in my own confidence with myself. Maybe it was as simple as me changing my tone, so they felt more invited to ask personal questions about my own faith or maybe it was a change in the wording that related to their own spiritual journeys. Whatever it was it had a lasting impact on all involved.

So what does that have to do with today’s gospel reading.

We are greeted again today by the Gospel of John. The last five Sundays we have spent on John 6 and to some it may come as a relief to know that after today we will be taking a break from John. In the last 6 weeks we have heard 6 renditions of the phrase “I Am the Bread of heaven”. 6 weeks in a row. 6 times. I don’t know about you, but my neurons were actively interacting because after all that’s a lot of repetition. And in today’s Gospel we get a glimpse into what the disciples were feeling and how they were processing this message from Jesus.

What I love about this Gospel is that it doesn’t leave out the fact that people were confused and concerned about Jesus’s message. Rather it explicitly illuminates that it was among Jesus’s closest followers who struggled with this message. In fact, they had already heard Jesus explain that he is the “bread of heaven” five times. It wasn’t until the 6th that a shift in the conversation happens. The sixth time elicits a different response from the disciples. Maybe it was because Jesus phrased his teaching in a way that resonated better or maybe it was because those who were listening realized it wasn’t a lack of understanding but a challenge to accept what was being taught. The conversation changed, the relationship between Jesus and the disciples changed. There was now a confidence and solidification in their beliefs and understanding of God and Jesus that wasn’t there before. The 12 disciples, as well as many others in the crowds repeated their calls for clarification and understanding and were greeted by a firm, patient repetition by Jesus.

Often when we hear or read these stories, we identify ourselves as the disciples in the story. Understandably as we are living disciples of Jesus seeking clarifications so that we may better understand and spread the message of God. In this Gospel we not only get to partake in learning from Jesus, but we are also given the opportunity to witness the transformation of the 12 disciples own understanding, confidence and ultimately faith.

They did the hard thing of speaking up and asking for something to be repeated, and they even played with the words on their own tongues so that they may better understand its true meaning. We are witnesses to what it takes to be followers of Jesus's, pushing for more, challenging and being challenged, asking for clarification, and settling into the unease of difficult teachings.

We are challenged by hard teachings and moments of confusion and doubt constantly. The news about the state of our world can be all consuming, the worry can be suffocating. Some days it can be hard just to choose what to put our energy and focus on. But showing up, staying in conversation even amid it all is faith.

Practicing the words, repeating the actions, listening for the spark that helps draw us closer to God, that is how we become more confident in our faith and grow to know God and Jesus more deeply.

Repeat it, question it, change it, embrace it, grow with it. Our faith is a journey of repetition.