

Sermon: Pentecost 13

The Rev. Mike Wernick

August 23, 2015

Year B

Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18

Psalm 34:15-22

Ephesians 6:10-20

John 6:56-69

Those who put the Revised Common Lectionary together... have again repeated the last two verses of last week's Gospel... and used them as the first two verses of this week's... to show its importance... but like a lot of preachers... I'm a little tired of this long succession of readings about bread... about bread and flesh... about eating flesh and drinking blood... again... tired of asking the Holy Spirit to inspire me and give me something insightful to say... I feel what I imagine at least some of the Jews felt... when they said... *This teaching is difficult...*

And not only is today's Gospel difficult... but the other passages from Joshua and the Epistle are difficult too...

What we didn't hear today in vv. 2b - 13 from Joshua... was how the Amorites, the Perizzites, Canaanites, Hittites, Girgashites, Hivites, and the Jebusites... were all either killed by God... or handed over to the Israelites... so that they could inherit the land that God had promised them through Moses... difficult... Joshua urges the Israelites to put away the gods that their ancestors served... and not to take up the gods of the Amorites in whose land they're living... those of you who watch Game of Thrones will recognize this ancient tension between old gods and new gods... difficult changes...

And in the Epistle... we are encouraged to put on the armor of God... so we can resist the powers of darkness... powers that resist the life-giving expression of God's love... difficult resistance...

In the Jewish Annotated New Testament... the editors suggest that today's Gospel passage would have been difficult for Jews to accept because they do not ingest the blood of an animal along with its meat... and they would not eat human flesh... the editors suggest that v. 53 may refer to the practice of *theophagy*... that is... the eating of one's god... a practice previously associated with Greco-Roman mystery cults... like those of Demeter and Dionysus...

But theophagy was nothing new... it was present in even more ancient sacrifice... so when people presented an offering to their god... some of it was consumed by the fire... but some was eaten afterwards... and they believed that their god shared the meal with them... by literally entering into the sacrificed meat... *sacrifice* means to make holy... and they believed that when they ate it... they were also taking in the divine qualities they desired...

Last week I shared that when we eat food... it becomes a part of us... when bite... tear... gnaw... chew... move it around with our tongue... add saliva... and swallow... when we ingest it... we give a thing permission... to become a part of us...

But when we eat spiritual food... when we become vulnerable to the body and blood of Christ... when we develop an inner disposition... like the woman who touched the fringe of Jesus' cloak... when we drink the living water he brings... when we are reborn from above with a spiritual identity... that's when the bread we eat will let us live forever... that's when we open ourselves to Mystery... to boundlessness... that's when we experience what we were created to experience...

Jesus said... I'm giving you the best that I've got... hearty... grainy... crusty... seeded warm organic bread right out of the oven... with lots of soft butter made from happy cows... why do you want to eat Wonder bread and margarine... why do eat bread that's not real bread... and settle for life that's not real life...

I think it's because we don't know any better... it think it's because we can't describe the color *fuchsia* to a blind person... I think it's because we don't have an adequate point of reference for the infinite... but I remember when I was five... how gigantic our block seemed... and how when I was twelve... I'd take the bus into NYC by myself... and how when I was seventeen... I went away to Israel for two months... and I remember how when I was five I struggled to spell the word *friend*... and how in sixth grade I came in third in the school spelling bee... and how now I can spell *antidisestablishmentarianism*... and so we learn... we grow... and we expand...

But about what do we murmur... what are the things in our lives that are too hard to swallow... how are these things to us... like eating flesh and drinking blood would have been to those who heard Jesus...

We may murmur when we see someone give money to a street person who doesn't deserve it... Thomas Merton said: *Our job is to love others without stopping to inquire whether or not they are worthy. That is not our business and, in fact, it is nobody's business. What we are asked to do is to love, and this love itself will render both ourselves and our neighbors worthy.*

We may murmur when we confuse fairness with justice... when we look into a mirror darkly and think we've got 20/20 vision... when we feel slighted because of someone else's good fortune when we have no idea what that person's been through or what challenges this good luck or good fortune will bring...

We may murmur when we take our personal preferences and try to turn them into universal principles... may murmur when we try to hold on to both our own personal perspectives and God's perspectives... murmur when we try to serve old gods and new gods...

But we are also those to whom Joshua spoke... we are those who must continue to make choices between the old and the new... of what to let go of and what to hold on to...

In 1914... Preserved Smith... yes... that's his name... wrote A Short History of Christian Theophagy... and when we go back in time from Jesus... like how astronomers travel back in time to teach the formation of the cosmos... when we move back past to the mystery cults of Demeter and Dionysus... back past incarnate gods... past the earliest known scriptures... back even past any notion of a god with human characteristics... when we go back to what we'd call the emergence of religion... Smith claims that the earliest stage of theology was totemism... not an idol... not a human-made god... but a thing that represented the sacred and connected it to the tribe... and it was through the totem that primitive people sought assistance and union with the divine...

And even with our post-modern and rational minds... even with our technology and our knowledge... even in the Reformation's rejection of transubstantiation... and its ongoing embrace of real presence... we are still wired in our deepest... most primitive and vulnerable places... like these people... for relationship... for connection... and for the kind of oceanic and persistent unity with God that lovers experience only momentary glimpses of...

But because Jesus was offering something so radically different than Wonder bread and margarine... so different than anything his followers could grasp... because what he offered was so far beyond any point of reference they had... because he was giving them access to their unfiltered source... many of his disciples... who had no way of understanding this gift... turned back and no longer went about with him...

And Jesus asked the twelve... the first time he referred to them that way... *Do you also wish to go away?* Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom can we go? We may not

have tasted all of it yet... but we've seen your pantry... we've seen your oven... we trust that you can make and deliver that hearty... grainy... crusty... seeded warm organic bread right out of the oven... you have the bread of eternal life... why would we go anywhere...

We all long for... we all yearn for the seamless experience of unity that primitive people sought... unity with the One from whom we have come...

And I think that because in our diminishing blindness... because we can't yet comprehend the vastness of the gift that God offers... because we get so impatient waiting for the bread to come out of the oven... maybe even opening the door too often and making it take even longer than it needs to... we can murmur too... but Thomas Merton rightly said: We already have what we seek... it is there all the time... and if we give it time... it will make itself known to us...

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