

14 Pentecost, Proper 16, Yr. B.

August 26, 2018

Joshua 24: 1-2a, 14-18; John 6:56-59

There are several things that I'd like to look at this morning. The first is choice, the second is our destiny as human beings which helps determine our choices, and the third is the nature of sacraments and what we're talking about when we talk about the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist.

First, choice – which is a theme in the first reading and in the Gospel. In the first reading, we're hearing Joshua in a sort of echo of Moses' earlier farewell address when he sets out the choice that the Israelites have between following Yahweh, which will bring life and turning away, which will lead to death. "Choose life, then," Moses urges them. There's a choice to be made in John's Gospel as well. After Jesus finishes his discourse telling his listeners that he is the bread of life, that those who eat his flesh and drink his blood will live forever, the text says that it was altogether too much and many of his disciples turned back. Note that it was DISCIPLES who turned back, not curiosity seekers, or hangers-on, but disciples, people who had had some level of commitment but couldn't make this further step.

I've not seen the movie *Freaky Friday*, but apparently it's also about choice, with a mother and her teen-age daughter going head-to-head over just about everything, ranging from a new boyfriend pulling up on a motorcycle to daily aggravations. At one point, the daughter, resisting alarm clocks and the mother's efforts to get her out of bed for school, clings on to the spokes of the headboard, as her mother grabs her by the ankles and pulls her up in the air and out of bed. The bickering keeps on until they pull up at school and when the daughter gets out of the car, the Mom leans out the car window with a bright smile and calls out, "Make good choices, dear!"

Choices – we make them constantly. And maybe it helps, once in a while, to stop and look at the overarching context for those choices – the larger questions, like who am I and where am I ultimately headed, what's my life all about, who am I called to be? The long-range theological answers to those questions have to do with being a child of God, whose final destiny is

union with God; and that destiny should guide our choices. There's an understanding here that there is more than this material world; that there's a spiritual world as well.

If we take a step back here, we can note that materialists really do think there's only this physical, material world. On the other extreme are groups like the Gnostics, some of whom go so far as to argue that the material world is an illusion, but, in any event, it's evil, meant to be escaped from as quickly as possible. What these two groups have in common is that they both see the material and spiritual worlds as separate and distinct. But Christians, because of the Incarnation, see this material world as suffused with the reality of the spiritual world; hence we can talk about a God-soaked universe. And, although we occasionally get glimpses of that deeper reality, most of the time, we accept that by faith.

So, here's the choice that Jesus is setting out in the gospel. There's bread that you need for life, but there's another kind of bread as well, the kind of "bread" you get when you abide in me, when you dwell in me and allow me to dwell in you, the kind of bread that will give you sustenance for your spiritual journey, the journey that you make towards a deeper and deeper movement into the mind of God.

There are a number of books that have been written about human development, some focus on psychological development and some on emotional development. But much has also been written about our spiritual development, which can be described as moving from ego-centrism (It's all about me) to ethno-centrism (it's all about me and my tribe, however that tribe is defined – family, nation, church, my GROUP) and finally to world-centrism – that view which recognizes that God loves everyone, the fact that we are all brothers and sisters. Another way of naming that is that as we come to put on the mind of Christ, we come to see as God sees. But no matter where we are on that journey, we need the sustenance of God's presence.

But, depending where we are on that journey, we may make choices differently. So, you'll remember earlier in this Gospel, when the crowds,

having been fed by Jesus, want to make him King, Jesus refuses – you want to make me king because your bellies are full; you missed the point completely – you want the gifts of God, but not God himself. You'd be satisfied with the material bread, when I want to give you so much more.

I'd like to pause here for a minute and reflect on that – that we prefer the gifts of God to God himself. At least at the beginning stages of our spiritual journey, perhaps that's true. I want God to protect me and those I love – God's like an insurance policy. Frederick Buechner writes about this powerfully. He tells of a time when one of his daughters was hospitalized with anorexia. He and his wife visited with her, played games, rubbed her back but, he said, she weighed less than she did as a child and if they had passed her on the street they wouldn't have recognized her. He said that he had passed beyond grief, beyond terror, was in the wilderness. But then, he caught a glimpse of what it must be like to love God truly.

“Though God was nowhere to be clearly seen, nowhere to be clearly heard, I had to be near him – in the elevator, walking down to the corridor...I loved him because there was nothing else left...I loved him not so much in spite of there being nothing in it for me, but almost because there was nothing in it for me...I caught a glimpse of what it must be like to love God truly, for his own sake, to love him no matter what. If I loved him with less than all my heart, soul, mind, I loved him with at least as much of them as I had left for loving anything....” I think that kind of love is what Jesus is offering when he offers himself to us and wants in return.

Just as he offered his flesh and blood to those long-ago crowds, in the Eucharist, he offers himself to us. We know not to take that literally, although sometimes children do hear it that way. Tom told the story of his granddaughter asking him, “You don't really drink Jesus' blood, do you?” Again, Jesus is talking on a spiritual plane, offering spiritual food and drink as sustenance for the spiritual journey.

This offering of his body and blood is what we are talking about when we talk about the real presence in the Eucharist. Jesus has used other images to talk about our relationship with him: Jesus is the shepherd and we're the sheep; he's the vine and we're the branches; he abides in God and we

abide in him. But in this passage, language is pushed to its limits to express this participation, this union with one another. Many attempts have been made to explain what happens in the Eucharist. The early church simply affirmed that the risen Christ was with them when they celebrated the Lord's Supper, but in the Middle Ages, attempts were made to define just exactly how this was happening. You may have heard about the theories of transubstantiation, or consubstantiation, or transsignification. I remember feeling a great relief, wading around in those theories, when I read one of the early Anglicans who said, "We don't know HOW or WHEN Christ is present, we just believe that he is." And today, many theologians have come around to that opinion: the manner and means of Christ's presence isn't going to be captured by any explanation. Christ's presence is real in this sacrament, but the manner and means may remain mysteries to us forever. When someone objects to children receiving communion before they "know what it's all about," we should be humble enough to know that we don't know what it's all about either. But we're blessed to have this sacrament available to us. Theology reminds us that God is omnipresent, but the sacraments are, in a sense, guarantees that in this time and place, in this action, God is here with us. Sacraments can be seen as those focused actions in which we're assured of God's presence, not least because when we're participating, WE are focused, intentional, coming with open hearts. But maybe we can think of sacraments as being a bit like training wheels – once we can see God here, we're more able to see God everywhere.

I remember a story about a fellow who was a regular attendee at AA meetings. Someone asked him why – they say the same things, it's pretty much the same people – why go? And the answer was simple: it's saving my life. Those of us who are blessed to participate in the Eucharist could answer the same way: it's saving our lives. Amen.