

Proper 16, Year B

August 23, 2015

Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-25

Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem, and summoned the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel; and they presented themselves before God. And Joshua said to all the people, "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: Now therefore revere the LORD, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. Now if you are unwilling to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD." Then the people answered, "Far be it from us that we should forsake the LORD to serve other gods; for it is the LORD our God who brought us and our ancestors up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and who did those great signs in our sight. He protected us along all the way that we went, and among all the peoples through whom we passed; and the LORD drove out before us all the peoples, the Amorites who lived in the land. Therefore we also will serve the LORD, for he is our God." But Joshua said to the people, "You cannot serve the LORD, for he is a holy God. He is a jealous God; he will not forgive your transgressions or your sins. If forsake the LORD and serve foreign gods, then he will turn and do you harm, and consume you, after having done you good." And the people said to Joshua, "No, we will serve the LORD!" Then Joshua said to the people, "You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen the LORD, to serve him." And they said, "We are witnesses." He said, "Then put away the foreign gods that are among you, and incline your hearts to the LORD, the God of Israel." The people said to Joshua, "The LORD our God we will serve, and him we will obey." So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and made statutes and ordinances for them at Shechem.

John 6:60-69

Jesus said, "I am the living bread which came down from heaven... he who eats this bread will live forever." When many of his disciples heard this, they said, "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?" But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, "Does this offend you? Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. But among you there are some who do not believe." For Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe, and who was the one that would betray him. And he said, "For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father." Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. So Jesus asked the twelve, "Do you also wish to go away?" Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God"

Joshua, the leader of the Israelites after Moses' death, is now himself near death, and as a final act before he dies, he gathers the Israelites together. He knows that, just as Aaron made a golden calf for the people to worship because Moses had spent too much time on top of Mt. Sinai, so the people during his *own* lifetime have been dabbling in the worship of the foreign gods of the peoples amongst whom they were living. So in a farewell speech, Joshua challenges them to **choose** between the God of the Israelites, the Lord Yahweh, and all the foreign gods with which they have dabbled in worshipping. "Whom will you serve?" he challenges them, "The gods of the Amorites, or the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Yahweh, the LORD?" "We will serve the LORD," the people answer, "for He is our God." And today's Old Testament reading stops there, leaving us the impression that the people of Israel are steadfast in their worship of the Lord, and committed to that path even after Joshua dies.

But if we read further in the story, we will find in the very next verse that Joshua does not *accept* the people's answer! He says to the people, "You **cannot** serve the LORD, for he is a holy God. He is a jealous God."

He *asks* them whom they will serve, and THEN *tells* them they **cannot** serve the LORD? What is going on here?

I think Joshua knows that the answer the people gave him was the answer they knew he wanted to hear; it was not an answer coming from the depths of their being. He knew that back in their homes, some of these people had carved idols on their mantels, and after they give this knee-jerk answer that they knew he wanted from them, they would go right back to their idol worship. So he presses them, calling their bluff, forcing them to answer again, this time after some thought and reflection, hopefully getting them to truly examine their hearts this time before answering.

It's the same thing that Jesus does with Peter at the end of John's Gospel, when the resurrected Christ appears to his disciples beside the Sea of Galilee. Jesus asks Peter, "Peter, do you love me?" and Peter answers immediately with the answer he knows will get him an "A" on the exam. "Of course, Lord! You know I love you."

But Jesus isn't looking for the kind of knee-jerk answer that Peter knows is "the right answer"; Jesus is looking for an answer that comes from the deepest recesses of Peter's heart and will. So Jesus asks again, and then a third time, trying to get Peter to answer from a deeper and deeper place within himself.

Both Joshua and Jesus are looking for what Richard Rohr calls "the Second Gaze". "Only the second gaze sees fully and truthfully," Fr. Rohr writes.

Only the second gaze sees fully and truthfully. We know in our hearts that this is

true! By the time most of us are adults, we are living our lives in large part on cruise control, and our responses are often patterned, conditioned, knee-jerk responses which we don't even think about. An evangelical friend may come up to you and ask, "Are you a follower of Jesus?" and you immediately respond, "Yeah, of course I'm a follower of Jesus; I'm a Christian!" It's a reflex response, coming not from the depths of your heart, but from your surface, ego identity. And you expect that your evangelical friend will accept your answer as the right answer, and check you off his list of people to be saved.

But what if your friend's question is not motivated by his desire to save another soul, but rather is a sincere question about where you are in your spiritual life. Perhaps your friend wants to get into a dialogue about what it *means* to follow Jesus, to get into a heartfelt, give-and-take conversation in which he himself is open to being changed. If that is the case, he might repeat the question again, saying, "Yes, I know you're a Christian; but are you a follower of Jesus?" He is looking for that "second gaze" which goes beneath the reflex, ego response to examine the heart.

Although it doesn't involve a repeated question, I think that in our Gospel today, Jesus is also trying to get his followers to come to that "second gaze". He has just been speaking about the necessity of eating him (which is language of intimate vulnerability). No longer was Jesus putting on a show for them to watch: flashy healing miracles, fiery teaching, casting out demons. Now he was getting intimately personal, calling upon the people to enter into his life at a deep, personal level – just as Joshua was calling his people to follow the LORD at a deep, personal level – and the people don't want to go there; so they leave.

Then Jesus turns to his closest disciples – the 12 – and asks them, "Do you also wish to go away?" They could have simply given Jesus the "right answer" – "Of course not!" But that is not what happens. I imagine that there is a pause before an answer comes; and then Peter, rather than giving what he has been conditioned to believe is the "right answer", coming from his "cruise control" mode, instead pauses for a second gaze into his heart, and then answers, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."

My friends, if you are at all like me, you live your life a good part of the time on "cruise control," responding to questions and situations in our lives the way we have been conditioned to respond throughout our lives. When questions are asked of us, especially questions that threaten to touch that vulnerable part of our being, we pull the answer – what we have learned is the "right answer," the expected and accepted answer – we pull it out of our databanks, not out of our hearts. We fail to engage in that "second gaze," gazing into the true depths of our almost always "mixed" motivations, gazing into the vulnerable parts of our hearts and souls, where our shadow side and our weaknesses which we don't want to admit reside. And yet this vulnerable part is also where the Spirit of God is most likely to find a

home, and where we will *meet* that divine Spirit. For the same is true of our individual selves as St. Paul said is true of the Body of Christ as a whole: “the members of the body that *seem* to be **weaker** are indispensable...” and again Paul says, “When I am weak, then I am strong.”

My friends, we live in a society where it is impossible to keep up with technology; where we get news instantly from around the world; where we can't simply communicate person-to-person but must check our voicemail, email, texts, and Facebook several times a day. It is so easy to get overwhelmed by all the stimulus and input and information and responsibilities bombarding us from all sides at all times that it is no wonder we put our lives on “auto-pilot” and function, respond, and react in our daily lives with answers and responses and behaviors conditioned in us and stored in our databanks. So easy, and in some cases, necessary and helpful.

But if that is the only way we live our lives – unconsciously, on auto-pilot or cruise control – we will not meet God. For God is alive, and mysterious, and deep, and creative, and still, and silent. And we only meet that God within our hearts when we gaze a second time.

AMEN