

Proper 16B 2021 Sermon

August 22, 2021

Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-19a, 21-24

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..." 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."

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, the Amorites. And so, in a farewell speech, Joshua challenges them to **choose** between the God of the Israelites, Yahweh, and all those foreign gods with which they have dabbled in worshipping. “Whom will you serve?” Joshua 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.”

But what comes next is baffling, to say the least: Joshua does not *accept* the people’s answer! Rather, he says to the people, “You **cannot** serve the LORD [Yahweh], for he is a holy God. He is a jealous God.”

First, Joshua *asks* the people whom they will serve, and THEN he *tells* them they **cannot** serve the LORD, Yahweh! 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 a reflective, *considered* answer coming from the depths of their being; it was a surface, knee-jerk answer. Joshua knew that back in their homes, some of these Israelites had carved idols on their mantels; and he knew that, after they had given that knee-jerk answer, “We will serve the Lord,” they would turn around and go right back to their idol worship. So Joshua presses them, calling their bluff, forcing them to answer *again*; but *this* time after some thought and self-reflection – hopefully, getting them to truly, honestly, and fearlessly look deeply into their hearts, and *then* answer the question, “Whom will you serve?”

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 on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. You remember the conversation: Jesus asks Peter, “Peter, do you love me?” and Peter answers immediately, reflexively, “Of course, Lord! You know I love you.” He gives the answer any good disciple is *supposed* to give. But Jesus is not looking for a knee-jerk response; he is looking for an answer that comes from the deep recesses of Peter’s heart. So Jesus asks a second, and then a third time – “Do you love me? Do you *really* love me?” (John 21:15-19)

Peter is like Golde in *Fiddler on the Roof*, when her husband, Tevya, asks her, “Do you love me?” “Do I what?” Golde responds. “Do you love me?” Tevye repeats. “Do I love you?...You’re upset, you’re worn out. Go inside, go lie down! Maybe its indigestion,” Golde responds. “Golde,” Tevye repeats, “Do you love me?” “I’m your wife,” Golde says. And Tevye replies, “I know... But do you love me?”¹ We live so much of our lives on the surface, on auto-pilot, that we often resist becoming vulnerable, open to God and love and spirit in the depths of our being.

Joshua and Jesus and Tevye are all seeking what Richard Rohr calls “the Second Gaze.” “Only the second gaze sees fully and truthfully,” Fr. Rohr writes.² Only the second gaze sees beneath our surface lives.

My friends, I think that by the time most of us are adults, we are living our lives in large part on cruise control, and our responses to people and situations are often conditioned, culturally acceptable, knee-jerk responses which we don’t give a second thought to. Some of our knee-jerk responses protect us from entering into serious conversation with someone, engaging them at anything but a surface level. “How are you?” we are asked; “Fine,” we respond – even if we are anything *but* fine. To be truthful, we may not even be aware of how we are.

Some of our knee-jerk responses confirm our own already-established opinions and biases (and we all have them!) – keeping us from the hard work of examining our pre-suppositions and engaging more deeply with people or circumstances that make us uncomfortable. For instance, we may see a person standing at a stoplight holding a cardboard sign on which is written, “Anything helps!” And our response is immediate, and judgmental. We think to ourselves, “That guy’s lazy; he needs to get a job! He’s probably just going to spend whatever money I might give him on drugs or booze, so I won’t give him anything; I won’t even look at him!” When we judge and label people out of hand, we don’t have to deal with the discomfort of acknowledging their pain, hopelessness, and whatever mistakes, tragedies, and misfortunes brought them to where they are. We don’t have to acknowledge our common humanity; don’t have to love our neighbor, as Jesus commanded.

And we all do it! Richard Rohr writes, “Even after fifty years of practicing [contemplative prayer], my immediate response to most situations includes... defensiveness, judgment, control, and analysis... The **first** gaze is seldom compassionate... Only after God has taught us how to live ‘undefended’ can we immediately (or at least more quickly) stand with and for the other, and for the moment.

“It has taken me much of my life to begin to get to the *second* gaze. By nature, I have a critical mind and a demanding heart, and I am impatient.”²

My friends, I think that in our Gospel today, Jesus is also trying to get his followers to come to that “second gaze.” Up until this point in John’s Gospel, Jesus has miraculously turned water into wine, healed a man who had been ill for 38 years, multiplied 5 loaves and 2 fishes into a satisfying meal for thousands, and walked on water. Pretty impressive, “flashy” stuff! No *wonder* people followed him, to witness these amazing miracles! But Jesus didn’t come so that people might marvel at his wondrous deeds; he came that we might be *transformed* in heart, soul, and mind. As long as Jesus’ followers were marveling at his miracles, they were seeing with the **first** gaze, on the surface. But, as we have noted in past weeks, John, in his Gospel, wants us readers to see Jesus’ wondrous deeds not as

miracles to marvel at, but rather as *signs* that point to a deeper, spiritual reality which, once seen with that **second** gaze, might transform us from within.

And it is this *inner* life that Jesus has been speaking about the past several weeks in our Gospel readings. “[U]nless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you,” he says. On the surface, that seems to be offensive, even revolting, language! Eat his flesh and drink his blood? So incomprehensible are these words, when heard the first time, viewed with the “*first gaze*,” that John tells us, “Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him.”

So, here’s the thing: if we want to “go about with” Christ, we need to be able to sit with what may appear, at first glance – first gaze – to be incomprehensible, uncomfortable, perhaps even revolting; certainly out of our comfort zone or the realm of our usual behavior. We need to have the courage to take that *second* gaze, to look **beneath** the *surface* world of our egos, our comfortable and accustomed biases and divisions, the unquestioned values and customs of our society and our various “tribes.”

Benedictine monk David Steindl-Rast has, for much of his life, taught about living with gratefulness. He offers a simple practice which can help us live more deeply, more appreciatively; to see more often through the lens of that “Second Gaze.” All we need to remember, he says, is what our parents taught us as children about what to do before crossing the street: Stop. Look. Go. “That is all we need to do for our spiritual life,” Br. David says.³ As we go through our daily lives, when we are often on “cruise control” and not attuned to the presence of the Spirit of God within, among, and all around us, we should take the time to consciously Stop, for a moment, what we are doing. Stop whatever train of thought is running through our head, whatever emotions we are wrapped up in. Stop the constant evaluating, critiquing, and judging everything and everyone. Stop thinking about what needs to be done tomorrow or next week. Take a deep breath, open our hearts, and become vulnerable and receptive to this present moment.

And then, Look. Not just at the *surface* of things, which is what we usually see with our “**first** gaze;” but really notice, observe, consider, experience, in that moment, all the sights and sounds and smells and feelings and people at their depth. And appreciate.

And then, Go. Take action; *do* something with the opportunity and awareness which gratefulness in the moment offers us.

My friends, if you are at all like me, you live your life a good part of the time on the surface, unconscious of the spiritual depths within **us**, our neighbor, and all of Creation. But if that is the only way we live – on the surface, never going deeper – we will not meet God. For God is mysterious, and deep, and creative, and still,

and alive, and surprising. And we only meet this God – within our hearts, within each other, within Creation – when we gaze a second time. When we stop, look, and *then* Go.

AMEN

- 1 <https://www.stlyrics.com/lyrics/fiddlerontheroof/doyouloveme.htm>
- 2 Richard Rohr's Daily Meditation, "[The Second Gaze](#)," Friday, January 1, 2021
- 3 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g4-o-IGVT7M>

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