

Lectionary 21B
Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church
Lakeland, FL
August 22, 2021

Joshua 24:1-18
Ps 34:15-22
Eph 6:10-20
John 6:56-69

Grace to you and peace from God and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Please pray with me. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Well, we finally got here. Today is the last Sunday for which our Gospel reading is from the sixth chapter of John, the Bread Discourse, in which Jesus reveals himself as the Bread of Heaven, the Living Bread that truly satisfies, the Bread by which we enter into eternal life, here and now, not in some distant time or place, not in the sweet bye and bye, but right here and right now.

Over these weeks we have steeped ourselves in this one chapter rather than walking the countryside with Jesus and hearing another story of his encounters with people, his healings and miracles, the events of his ministry. No. Instead we sat with this one chapter, mining it for meaning, eager for understanding. And I daresay we have been rewarded, if you will. We saw the abundance with which Jesus fed the thousands and were invited to imagine the abundance available to us today. Then we heard the story of the orphans of World War II who while provided every necessity of life still suffered with trauma until they were given a loaf of bread to sleep with – not because they didn't have enough to nourish themselves but because it was a symbol of hope. We were invited to consider what it is for which we truly hunger and where is the bread that gives us hope. Then we thought about how it is that we live our everyday lives feeding on the Bread of Life, feeding on Jesus, not just in the Holy Eucharist, but in relationship with him and with each other, hearing each others' stories, sharing our own, building a unity in Christ not born of conformity but rejoicing in diversity.

Last week we considered the profound mystery of Holy Communion in which Jesus is the host of the meal, a meal of great abundance by which we receive his very body and blood as we gather together around the Table. A motley group of people with battle scars and warts and faults, all hungry for the bread that will last.

And today we witness a variety of reactions of those who heard these amazing words from Jesus' mouth. Many of the followers who heard them said, "This is a very hard saying! Who can bear it?" Others were confounded by this, murmuring and grumbling as did the Israelites in the wilderness generations before, offended by Jesus' audacity, always seeking some greater sign, some other miracle by which they could be convinced that this Jesus was worth following. Some who had been in the crowd, some who had been following, shook their heads and walked away. It was just too hard. A bridge too far. They could not fathom it, could not believe. And so they left.

And Jesus turned to The Twelve, looked deeply into each of their eyes, and asked matter-of-factly, "Do you want to go away as well?" And can't you just hear the pregnant pause, the silence. I imagine a number of heads dropped as the disciples looked down at their feet, wondering perhaps what to say. How to respond. A moment of truth.

And so it was in the first reading today, the reading from Joshua. The Hebrews had been rescued from Egypt, led through the wilderness, years upon years, as long as it took to be shaped from a

disparate group of previously enslaved people into the people of God, indeed a community of faith, fed with manna, bread from heaven. At long last, they had come to the threshold of the Land of Promise, a land flowing with milk and honey. And their leader Joshua, who succeeded Moses, gathered them around and spoke plainly to them. He told them the story of what God had done in calling Abraham and Sarah and Jacob and Leah and Sarah. How they had responded in faith to that call. Then how God had redeemed them from slavery in Egypt, fed them, guided them in a pillar of cloud by day and pillar of fire by night. Given them victory over the nations that were their enemies. God said, "I gave you a land on which you had not labored and cities that you had not build, and you dwell in them. You eat the fruit of vineyards and olive orchards that you did not plant." God provided for them in abundance.

And Joshua looked at them, the twelve tribes, all gathered around him and said to them matter-of-factly, "it's time for you to choose who you are going to serve – the foreign gods that may be so appealing and attractive, or the God of our forebears, the God who has been persistently present with us. Choose." A moment of truth.

Now, I do not want to be misunderstood. This is very important – in that moment of truth, one is not asked to "make a decision for Jesus," that is, to be "born again" or "be saved." No.

You see, Jesus has made a decision for us. Jesus has chosen us. Jesus provides an abundance. Jesus satisfies our deepest hunger. What then is our response to this grace? Do we live into that abundance or do we walk away?

Think of this in terms of "because/therefore" rather than "if/then." The "if/then" scenario goes like this: IF we act in a certain way, IF we do what God wants, IF we keep the Commandments, etc, THEN we can be assured of God's love for us into eternity. Think about that for a moment.

But "because/therefore" goes like this: BECAUSE God loves us, BECAUSE Jesus feeds us so abundantly, BECAUSE Jesus wants an intimate relationship with us, THEREFORE we say "Yes, Lord, we will serve you." The difference between these two is fundamental. One depends upon us and the other depends upon God.

Jesus asks, "Do you want to go away too?" and with Peter we say, "Lord to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life."

BECAUSE Jesus is the Bread of Life, BECAUSE Jesus feeds us with abundance, BECAUSE we are truly hungry, THEREFORE, we follow, THEREFORE, we travel together with each other, THEREFORE, we know, we believe that Jesus is the Holy One of God who came down from heaven and gives life to the world. And THEREFORE we are drawn into this eternal life – not because of anything we have done, not because of any worthiness on our part, not because we try harder and do better. But simply BECAUSE of the abundant graciousness of the One who loved us first, the One who chose us at great cost, the One who continues to feed us so that we together can become what we eat – the body of Christ in the world. A gathering of the faithful that shares God's love with each other, our community and the world.

Thanks be to God.