

Sermon for the Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 16B) August 23, 2009  
 Delivered by the Rev. Margaret Bullitt-Jonas Grace Church, Amherst, MA

Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18  
 Psalm 34:15-22

Ephesians 6:10-20  
 John 6:56-69

### Choose this day whom you will serve

*“As for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.” (Joshua 24:15b)*

This morning we reach the fifth and final Sunday of our immersion in Chapter Six of the Gospel of John, the extended discourse about Jesus as the bread of life. We have had weeks to reflect on the meaning of the Eucharist, and now comes the decision point: How will we respond? Today’s reading makes it clear that some of Jesus’ followers are shocked by what they have heard. Jesus uses vivid, visceral language as he talks about asking them to eat his body and drink his blood. If you take this literally, it sounds like cannibalism. Not only that, he promises that the one who eats this bread will live forever. To their ears that sounds patently absurd. Can this man Jesus really be the revelation of God? Some of the disciples shake their heads. “This teaching is difficult,” they complain. “Who can accept it?” Jesus turns to the twelve and asks them, “Do you also wish to go away?” So there we have it -- a moment of truth, a moment of decision.

Our Gospel is paired this morning with a passage from Hebrew Scripture about a similar, decisive choice. Joshua gathers all the tribes of Israel to Shechem -- a city in Canaan -- and he summons the leaders, and they stand together in the presence of God. Joshua tells them, “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...” [Joshua 24:2a, 14-15a].

On both counts -- our Gospel passage and our reading from Hebrew Scripture -- it is a day for decision-making, a day for clarifying what we worship and to what we want to give our ultimate allegiance.

“Put away the gods that your ancestors served...” Joshua declares. Doing that requires an act of self-examination. What *are* the gods that I serve? For example, what does my bank statement or my credit card statement say about my values? What does the way I spend my free time say about what matters most to me? How does the way that I treat family-members and co-workers, neighbors and friends show which gods I serve? To what do I give my best, most focused attention and care? What do I really care about? What motives really drive me? What goals really draw me forward? Are

there compulsive patterns of thought or behavior to which I am excessively attached? You and I can go to church and say very sincerely that we worship God, but in the hurly-burly of daily life there are all kinds of lesser gods that tug at us and clamor for our attention and our devotion.

Half the time we may not even be aware of those other gods, which is one reason we need periods of quiet reflection and prayer. Self-awareness is essential to our life in Christ, and when we settle down in a quiet place to pray, we can begin to notice where our minds tend to go. We all have habitual preoccupations and patterns of thought, and as we sit there quietly, keeping a simple focus such as following our breath or gently repeating a sacred word, we begin to notice the obsessive patterns that make our minds contract. Maybe we suddenly notice how often our minds fill with judging thoughts -- how often we occupy ourselves with having opinions about other people or comparing ourselves with them. A lot of our mental traffic consists in judging and comparing -- *I like it, I don't it, I'm right, You're wrong, That's good, That's bad*. This kind of dualistic thinking is natural to ordinary consciousness, and we can take it for granted and give it ultimate authority and let it run our lives.

As we sit there in that open space before God, paying attention to our breath or to our sacred word, we can also begin to notice what motives really drive us -- maybe a desire to win at all costs, to prove that we are right. Maybe a desire to look good and to be liked or admired. Maybe a desire to feel only pleasant feelings and to avoid discomfort at all costs. Maybe a desire to be different, to be special. Maybe a persistent desire to keep provoking a fight, or a desire to avoid conflict, no matter what. There are all kinds of drives and desires that can propel us through life, and it is important to become conscious of what they are. We can treat any of them like gods, and unwittingly find ourselves setting up secret altars and burning incense and bowing to them.

The most tempting and alluring god of all is the god of my self. I do it every day: I declare myself the measure of all things, the judge of all things, the one against which everything else finds its proper place. If such and such serves me, it is good. If such and such pleases me, or appeals to me, or makes me feel good, then it is good. If it doesn't, it is bad. I become a little god in my own little universe, and everything revolves around Me.

That is a question to ask ourselves this morning: what are the idols or false gods that I tend to worship? Where is my energy of devotion getting stuck or constricted, channeled in the wrong direction? The challenge to identify our false gods is not just a question for personal self-reflection -- it is a social question, too. To ask, "What are the gods of our ancestors?" is to ask a social question. What are the gods of the society around us? There are plenty of false gods out there -- the god of consumption and materialism, the god of militarism, the god of fame and celebrity, the god of individualism. Take your pick. If we want to "put away" our false gods, we have to

spot them, to recognize them for what they are, to stand up to them, to “put on the whole armor of God” [Ephesians 6:11], as we heard in the reading from Ephesians, and to repudiate their power in our lives. “Choose this day whom you will serve.” It is a fateful choice, a choice that has consequences for us both as individuals and as citizens of a nation.

In today’s story, the people answer, “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” [Joshua 24:16-17a]. The people look back over their salvation history and they recognize -- as we do -- that the living God, the true God, is a God of liberation, who sets the oppressed free, drawing us “out of the house of slavery” and into an open space in which we and everyone else are loved.

The people go on to say, “[God] protected us along the way that we went, and among all the peoples through whom we passed” [Joshua 24:17b] -- which means that the living God is always with us, guiding and protecting us along the way.

The passage also says, “the LORD drove out before us all the peoples, the Amorites who lived in the land” [Joshua 24:18]. This is a troublesome line, for like many passages in Hebrew Scripture, this sentence makes it sound as if the ancient tribes of Israel took over the land of Canaan by force, and that the LORD God endorsed and even carried out that warfare. I am glad to say that at least some historians say that the settlement of Canaan was in fact carried out much more peacefully than these passages would suggest. So this line may not be historically true. In any case, most of us would not honor a God who violently “[drives] out all the peoples, the Amorites who lived in the land.” I do not take this line as literal, historical truth, but rather as a way of saying that the living God will clear a path before us, that God will drive our enemies away -- including the enemies within us, our own self-defeating and love-denying habits of thought and behavior.

Today we choose again the living God who sets us free, who accompanies and protects us, who opens a path before us. God comes to us today in Christ Jesus, whose indwelling presence abides within us, and who gives us life through his word and presence and bread. Whoever eats this bread will live forever -- and that “forever” life is already here. Eternal life does not start beyond the grave, after we have died. It is already here, as we cast our lot with the liberating God of love whose will is to topple every empire, every idol and false god, and to set us free. Every time we take in the bread and wine of the Eucharist, we renew our commitment to the living God. We are drawn again into the risen life of Christ. And quickly or slowly our lives are changed. We begin to bear witness to what we love.

I’d like to end with a poem by Daniel Berrigan. I’m sure most of you remember or have heard of him -- the Jesuit priest who engaged for years in non-violent civil disobedience against the Vietnam War, against militarism, against poverty. His brave,



