



Sermon for Sunday, August 27, 2006

12th Sunday after Pentecost

The Rev. Brenda G. Husson

Joshua 24: 1-2a, 14-25 and John 6:60-69

There's a story told of a minister who while on vacation with his wife decided to attend a megachurch to see what that was all about.* A megachurch, for those of you who don't know, is a church that has a membership on the order of 5,000 people or more. In fact there's one I've heard of in Atlanta, I think, that has a membership of about 40,000, though I have a hard time even imagining that. In any case, this minister and his wife walked into the vast auditorium like space where worship was held and were looking around as they found seats. The minister could see that his wife was looking around with a certain disdain and he leaned over to her and whispered, 'You have to admit that I could never fill a church this way.' To which she replied, looking at him with a mixture of pride and love, 'No, dear, you couldn't. But you could certainly empty it.'

I was reminded of this story, because in this morning's Gospel, Jesus has a lot more in common with that minister than with the megachurch. Those who have been hanging on his every word and marveling at his every miracle, are now heading for the exits as fast as they can. So many are leaving, in fact, that he finally turns to the twelve disciples, to his inner circle, and says, "Do you want to leave as well?"

"Do you want to leave as well?" Peter, of course, makes his wonderful profession that Jesus is the Holy One of God and that he and the others aren't going anywhere. But even if they stay, it is clear that these words of Jesus are too much for many to bear. And many, who up to now would have counted themselves as his disciples, decide they can go no further with him.

That may seem strange to us, because the language Jesus uses is very familiar. What we hear this morning is the last part of a long section in which Jesus talks about himself as the bread of life, a long discourse in which Jesus says that, "unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood you will not have life within you." That's language we know well, language we associate with Holy Communion

where we talk about the Body and Blood of Christ all the time.

So why did so many feel compelled to flee? At this point in the story they would not have known about Holy Communion. There has been no last supper yet. Yet their reaction is not one of simple confusion, there is a real rejection of Jesus' message. Some of the commentaries on this passage suggest that some may have thought Jesus was suggesting a kind of cannibalism. I don't think so. I don't think they were so naïve as to think that Jesus was actually going to offer himself for them in that way.

I think they flee because Jesus is, in this long discourse and in the words we heard this morning, turning their entire understanding of God on its head. He is upending the entire sacrificial system around which the temple in Jerusalem was built, overturning all their beliefs about who God is and how God acts. It's not confusion that sends them running; they understand what Jesus is saying and don't like it.

So what exactly has he turned upside down? Worship in the temple in Jerusalem, the sacred center of Jewish life in Jesus day, was built around a sacrificial system. People would bring offerings to the temple for various occasions and feasts, a pigeon, perhaps if they were poor or a lamb or a calf, all unblemished, the best that could be found. Those animals were killed and their blood offered to God and their bodies burned, the smoke ascending to heaven. These animals were stand-ins, stand-ins for us, who need to offer ourselves to God. Over and over again. God would accept that sacrifice as a sign of our devotion, our commitment, the offering of our own bodies and blood and we would, in turn, receive God's favor. That was the system that was in place and had been for generation upon generation upon generation.

Yet here is Jesus saying that our offering, our self-offering, is not what God wants. Nor what God needs. Jesus says God is not some God up above us whom we need to appease again and again.

Jesus says, instead, that God has come down to us, right where we are and that God is the one who will offer the one and only sacrifice for us. God is the one whose blood, through Jesus Christ, is going to flow on our behalf.

That is of course, just what we believe. That Jesus offered himself on the cross once for all and that the forgiveness and redemption offered there is sufficient for us all and for ever. But if we really consider all that this means, there is still plenty of room for us to find ourselves unsettled. Because if God is going to come and be with us, God is going to be known to us not in power, not in might, not with all the trappings of glory and success, but in weakness, in poverty, in loss and even in death.

Those who hear Jesus don't want a God like that. Truth to tell, a lot of the time, we don't want a God like that either. Consider the story from Joshua. Joshua addresses the people when he gathers all of Israel at Shechem and says, "Choose this day whom you will serve." And they say, "We will serve the Lord our God." Then they cite all God's marvelous acts: releasing them from bondage in Egypt, parting of the Red Sea and bringing them over on dry land, the God who fed them in the wilderness and conquered their enemies as he brought them to the promised land.

Of course they're going to worship that God. That is the God who has made a way for them and has demonstrated his power again and again and again. That sense of power and might is also the appeal of a certain brand of Christianity, Christianity that claims that if you just get right with the Lord everything will go your way. You can pack a church with that promise. But the tragedy is that if we believe that, when loss comes or grief comes or failure; when we are overwhelmed by our sense of our sinfulness then we can only believe that these are signs that God has abandoned us.

Jesus says something quite different. He says you must eat my body and drink my blood because the God you worship, the God who made you, loves you and will save you, is a God who pours himself

out for you, meeting you in the midst of weakness and doubt, sin and fear. When we convince ourselves that all we need is a strong God to lead the charge, when we believe --against all the evidence-- that we can somehow secure our life from pain and loss, we do not want to hear about God who comes to us in weakness. Hearing Jesus that day many of his followers fled. And when that is the Gospel that is preached, it can, indeed, empty a church.

But I would not be standing here today if the message of the Gospel was a message that had no power other than to drive people away. For I actually believe, contrary to that story of the minister and his wife, that if we are a church that worships the Lord our God, a God who did indeed part the Red Sea but who was known most fully to us when he hung from a cross on Calvary, then we have good news that can fill the church and, much more importantly, offer hope to the world. A church that takes the Gospel seriously where people can come and gather together and pray together in the midst of enormous differences. A church where people know there is a place for them when all is well and when nothing is right. A church whose members know that the grace we have received and the goodness we know – the goodness of God – is never meant to be our private possession but is a gift meant for the whole world.

Then we become a church that not only fills the pews here but takes the Gospel into the streets, knowing that in the very midst of the brokenness we see around us, in the very midst of conflict and despair, Jesus Christ is present, to feed us with his body and blood and raise us all to new life. Then we are a church that with Peter can say, "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." The One God who is with us at all times and in all places and always leading us into new life.

**Story adapted from Faith to Faith (New York: Harper and Bros., 1933), page 142*