

21st Sunday in Ordinary Time cycle B

August 27, 2006

To hear my friends tell the story, the last camping trip we took—and I do mean THE LAST--ended with me leaving them in the cabin to die, patently not true; what happened was, we had a fire going, well, kind of going, smoldering for hours with fresh, green wood, but undaunted, one of my fellow cabin dwellers just kept insisting that he could get the fire going. The more he tried, the more the wood kicked out smoke, until finally around 2:00 a.m., I just could not take it any more. I got up, announced to the other four, who looked like so many shadows in the smoke, that they were free to stay there and choke on all the smoke if that was what they wanted, but I was going to go and spend the rest of the night sleeping in my car. So no, I didn't drag them out by force, but neither did I leave anybody to die. Everybody was awake, and everybody was free to stay or free to get out. It's called the power to make a rational choice, and it is one of the things that makes us uniquely human: not just drawing on instinct, but drawing on reason, which dictated to me that night that, cold as it would be in my car, at least there would be some air to breathe. They chose to try and get some sleep in that smoky cabin, but as for myself, I will always choose cold, crisp, *fresh* air.

In the first reading today from the book of Joshua, Joshua has gathered the Israelites, now at the end of the forty-year trek in the desert. They had been through so much over those decades: the hunger, the wandering, the elements; times when they had angered God and felt his deserved wrath, the deaths of Moses and his generation, and finally, the conquering of the lands which had been promised to them so long ago. And now, at the end of their journey, Joshua asks them, a people who had demonstrated how tenuous their faith could be at times, if they were truly committed to being faithful to God. Decide today whom you will serve, he says to them, the false gods of those around them, or the One True God who brought them to the promised land. Decide today whom you will serve: they're free to go. God isn't holding them captive, isn't forcing them to remain against their will. Joshua says that he and his household for sure are going to serve the Lord; the others must decide, and commit, as well. The people consider the reasons why they should stay with God: One, he freed them from slavery. Two, he performed such mighty miracles in their midst, from the Passover to the battle of Jericho; he protected them on their journey, fed them and gave them water. Of course, they will serve the Lord. But Joshua doesn't intend it as a rhetorical question; those reasons which they gave, they had had throughout the journey, but that didn't stop them from grumbling and murmuring against God along the way. Joshua knew that at some point, their faith would have to be more than something that they merely fell into; it would have to be a choice: a firm, consistent, decided choice.

In the passage today from John's Gospel, Jesus' followers are given a very similar choice. They had just witnessed the miracle of the fish and the loaves; they loved that, and would follow him around forever if being his follower meant witnessing such spectacles. Then they heard his claim to divinity, that he is the one that came down from heaven; that, they weren't so sure of, even though they had witnessed the miracle; this would be a little bit harder to accept. But then, he get to the crux of the matter: the giving of himself to them in the Eucharist, his flesh being true food, his blood being true drink. He doesn't say how he will do it, but he is clear on the fact that he will do it. This, many of his disciples cannot imagine, and because they don't yet understand how he will do this, they do not trust that he has a way to do this. And for many, this last teaching is too much, and they respond by saying "this saying is hard; who can accept it?" When Jesus makes reference to the spirit and the flesh, that it is the spirit that gives life, while the flesh is of no avail, he's referring to the natural versus the supernatural. Only the person who is "born of the Spirit" can accept his supernatural challenge: that Jesus is from heaven, that he gives life, and that he can

give us himself sacramentally in a way not repugnant to our senses and sensibilities, but rather in a way which speaks to our senses, namely, in the Eucharist. He challenged them, as he had been doing already, to go beyond what they had already known and experienced in their relationship with God, go beyond their limited notions of how God can work.

And so many of them left, in what I think is one of the most poignant and frankly, tragic scenes of the Gospel outside of Jesus' passion and crucifixion: John writes, "as a result of this, many of his disciples returned to their former way of life and no longer accompanied him." So close, and yet so far. Just this close to their redemption, to their salvation, to not only coming to know their God as he truly exists in eternity, and not only knowing him, but being united with him sacramentally if they could only have accepted that some things are beyond the grasp of our comprehension. But no; this is too hard. And then they go, and Jesus lets them go; for although he came to draw all people to himself, he cannot deny himself, he cannot deny truth, just to accommodate man's sometimes narrow vision. And then he says to the twelve, "do you also want to leave?" And Peter succinctly sums up their reason for staying: not, "no Lord, because we understand everything that you're talking about," or "no Lord, because this isn't hard for us at all." They don't fully understand it, and it is hard. But Peter says, "to whom shall we go?" Well, they could go with all the others, with all the others throughout time who went their own way rather than stay on God's way. But then Peter adds, they stay, because only Jesus has the words of eternal life. It's sad but true, that Jesus' disciples leave him all the time; the biggest religious group in the United States after practicing Catholics is fallen away Catholics. To whom shall we go? Some go to where there are no demands placed on them, to a place where they can decide for themselves what's right and what's wrong; go to a place where there is no call for self-denial, no need to change any of their behaviors, no reason to give up any of their time; they go to where they think there will be no cross. They go off to work, they go off to play, they go back to bed, they go to places where they hope to enjoy the promises of this world, with its pleasures and amusements and wealth enjoyed to the full. But if they go there, they do not go to Jesus, who **alone** has the words of eternal life. Those other things, the rewards of this world, will one day end; and those who choose that path will have all that they love end with it. Those who go with Jesus and who cultivate a love for him and a desire to live according to his word, are setting themselves up for an eternal reward. And I believe that if anyone really knows what they have here, they will not want to leave, no matter how great the demands, no matter how large may be their accompanying cross.

This saying is hard; who can accept it? Well, Peter could, and did. Mary could, and did. Mary Magdalene could, Martha and Mary and Lazarus could, the saints throughout history could, I can. Anybody can accept this; but not everybody will want to accept it. God does not leave us to die a spiritual death ever, any more than I left four of my friends to die in a cabin: we're wide awake, can see what's happening, and we are free to make our choices; in fact, we could not really love God if we could not do so out of freedom. So now, we choose: the Savior, or the world? That whom or which we choose is that whom or which we will serve. It's like that smoke-filled cabin: we're all awake, and can stay, or we can go. Do what you want, but know what you'll get—and what you won't get—when you make the choice. As for me, I hope to follow the example of Peter, and Mary, and all the saints. In receiving this Eucharist today and receiving Our Lord worthily, may we demonstrate that our intention is to find peace and fulfillment through self-denial, through a life of service towards God and our fellow man, through prayer and self-discipline. Today, may we show that as for us, we will choose the Lord.

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