

FIRST SCRIPTURE LESSON      Joshua 24:1-25

SECOND SCRIPTURE LESSON      John 6:56-69

Last week I spoke about centering our individual lives around Christ, I spoke about how Christ is the only thing which can hold our lives together as they seem to be falling apart, torn apart by fears, and anxieties. I told you that when we center our lives around something else, whatever it may be, we are doomed to disappointment. I spoke about how it is only God's grace which can heal our brokenness and become something that we can base our entire lives around. I proclaimed to you how in the reading from John, which is concluded this morning, Jesus announces the present-tensed Gospel message, that He is concretely present in each of our lives.

This morning in the reading from Joshua, Joshua the new leader of the Israelites who has taken over for Moses, has gathered the all the tribes of Israel together. They have finally made it into the Promised Land. There are no more deserts, no more wilderness, no more wandering, no more manna, no more drudgery of everyday life,

(PAUSE)

no more classes, no more exams, no more of the same endless, ceaseless wandering day after day. It is all behind them ,they have come through the wilderness, we have come through the wilderness, whether it be financial uncertainly, the grief from the loss of a loved one, illness and loneliness, the anticipation of a new child, the transition from seminary into ministry, and arrived in the promised land, which we have been waiting for. But as anyone who has gone through their own wilderness can attest to, that no matter how green the Promised Land looks while you wander, once you arrive you realize that it is not paradise. Paradise is lost. You realize that the

Promised Land, the other side of the wilderness has its own share of troubles, it has its own conflicts.

This is exactly what the Israelites find once they enter the Promised Land. They find that there are already people living there, who do not seem really eager to give up this land to this new band of immigrants. They find that even though they have finally crossed the Jordan River, having survived slavery, and wandering, and leadership change, that the Promised Land is not the paradise they imagined, overflowing with milk and honey. It is not the image of a promised land that we have in our heads, which keeps us moving forward while we are stuck in the wilderness. How many of us have entered a new school year, a new job, a new relationship, a new stage of life and thought, this is it, I have finally come through the wilderness, I am finally where I should be and from here on out life will be good, I will have fulfillment, I will have peace. Only to find that this new stage in our life, this new relationship, this new place is still filled with conflicts and does not seem to be the ideal we had within our minds.

This land the Israelites enter, is full of conflict and hardships, which they encounter as soon as they enter into the land, following Joshua. They discover that the Promised Land is not defined by it being the perfect paradise, but by being the place where God wants them to stay. It is defined by being the place where God wants us to be. This promised land is not exactly what we want it to be, but it is where God places us, where God wants us to stay, to worship, to work towards His promised kingdom, and this is exactly where God brought the Israelites.

Joshua has brought his people into the land and gathered them together, all of them, the whole congregation of Israel. Joshua says to his people “Long ago your ancestors Terah and his sons Abraham and Nahor lived beyond the Euphrates and served other gods. Then I took your

father Abraham from beyond the River and led him through all the land of Canaan and made his offspring many. I gave him Isaac; and to Isaac I gave Jacob and Esau”.

The narrative that Joshua describes, mirrors their own, mirrors our own. He reminds his people that long ago, God called Abraham from his home, from what he knew into the unknown, into a land that was not his own. Joshua tells them that long ago God called Abraham away from what was familiar, from his family and his friends, away from the basis for his old community. God called Abraham to this new life in this strange land, so that his life would be defined by a new center, not the other gods, not his family but by God. Around this center, the text makes it clear that God gave Abraham this new community, this family, which the Israelites are part of. This new community in this new land is defined by their center.

As Joshua continues his speech, he reiterates again and again, that God had done this for them. Everything they have has been given by God, everything that has occurred, whether it was Moses being sent to them, or their enemies being handed over to them, Joshua’s message from God leaves no mistake, “it was not by your sword or by your bow. I gave you a land on which you had not labored, and towns that you had not built, and you live in them; you eat the fruit of vineyards and oliveyards that you did not plant”.

The basis of this community, this band of wandering ex-slaves, being sent to stay in this land which does not resemble what they imagined is the work of God. There is no confusion about how the Israelites acquired this land, it was not by their own works, their own merits, anything they did, it was solely by the hand of God. Joshua is proclaiming to them, not the good news about what man is capable of, about their own triumph, or his triumph as a leader, but it is the good news about what God has done for them. Their beginning as a people, their arrival in this land has all been orchestrated by God, and they have merely been passive recipients of

God's work. Their journey into the Promised Land, which is no paradise, is not their work, it is not their accomplishment. Joshua reminds them how God was able to give life to these people, to create a community where none existed, to reap what the Israelites had not sown. Joshua is reminding them that it is not about them, it is not about any of us.

Often when we experience the faith, which we have been given, for the first time, whether we grew up in a congregation our entire lives, or never entered a church until we recognize the grace already present in our lives, we have this vision of what the Church ought to be. We go into a community of faith expecting that we will find a group of believers just as zealous as we are, in exactly the same place as we are spiritually, and that we will grow in the faith together, having all of our spiritual and emotional needs met. We expect to find people doing extraordinary things, but instead we often find disappointment in the ordinary. We find that we are disappointed by finding that the people we are called to be with are not where we are. We find that there are people who are nothing like us, we find that there are people who profoundly disagree with us on just about everything, so much so that we can barely stand to be in the same room as them, let alone worship God with them. And yes, for you Yankees fans, I mean you. We expect to find peace but so often we find discord. This forces us to grieve over what we never had. We can feel like we lost something. You will feel like after making your way through your wilderness, through your dark night, you have come to the other side that you have come into this body which has disappointed all of your expectations. You may even feel like you are losing God's presence in your life, because you struggle to find Christ within community. And you have to ask yourself, is this enough? Is this community Christ has called you to enough?

And this is where Jesus' words recorded by John come to us, as people who need to hear His presence proclaimed to us again and again. The text begins where we concluded last week, where Jesus says "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them".

When we hear Jesus' words we are forced to reconcile that in our life together, communing with the Incarnate God, that we each have Christ at the Center of our lives. We are forced to reconcile that this community is one that is created through and in Jesus Christ, that we have been chosen and united in eternity with one another. It is only then that we realize that it is not only by defining our lives by our Center in the work of Christ, but to define the Church by what Christ has done for all of us. We are forced to accept that it is not about us, it is not about me it is not about you. Life is not about our complaints, our needs, even our spiritual needs, but about the longing of the Triune God to have fellowship with us, and this is what defines our life together. The Church is defined by the only thing which could hold it together for two thousand years. The Church is not defined by our boundaries, which attempt to limit the wonderworking grace of God, but by the center which can hold it all. The Church is not defined either by its physical walls or walls we create.

Walls that divide Jews from Greek, liberals from conservatives, walls which divide people on my side of social issues from people on your side of a social issue, walls which divide me and people like me, with my skin color from people who are not like me, who do not have my skin color, those who speak my language and those who do not speak my language, those who like my kind of music and those who do not like my kind of music. None of these walls are necessary, because the center holds it all together, we do not need to worry about these boundary issues. Your life will hold together by the center we find in Jesus Christ, the Church will hold, has been held together and can only be held together by Jesus Christ.

The disciples know this and yet still they say, “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it”. Placing Christ at the center of our lives and the center of our Church and dismantling all of the walls we have worked so hard to maintain is difficult. Accepting that the work of our salvation is not our own, any more than the Israelites were responsible for acquiring their land, is difficult. Accepting that it is not about us is difficult. What Christ desires of us, is the same as what Joshua tells his people “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”.

God pours out His grace upon us, and we cannot possibly accept it passively. God has done these incredible things for the Israelites, Christ has done incredible things for mankind, the Holy Spirit continues to do incredible things in the life of this congregation. We have no choice but to respond, the grace that God pours out for us in Jesus Christ costs us nothing, but we cannot treat it cheaply. Once we as a community hear the Gospel proclaimed to us in the present tense, that Christ is ever present for us, once we are called into this community of faith where Christ is at our center, we have no choice but to respond, the grace draws forth a response from us. And this is discipleship. Discipleship is having this outpouring of grace into our life together, and responding “we will serve the Lord”.

Discipleship is accepting Christ’s words “It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless”. These seem like strange words after He just finished telling everyone about what His flesh is capable of, what we know His flesh has done for us. Jesus’ words are not speaking about His flesh, which takes away the sins of the world, He is talking about our flesh. Our flesh, which is marred by sin, the same sin which caused Joshua to question the Israelites commitment to God, the same weakness which makes us think it is all about us, the same weakness which finds

disappointment in our gathered community, the same weakness which makes us define our community by boundaries instead of the center.

The only thing which can give life to all that we do, to our gathered communities, is the Holy Spirit. It is only by the power of the Holy Spirit that we are able turn the Promised Land, where God calls us to stay, into God's kingdom. Discipleship, is accepting whatever mission God is calling us to do within the promised land, responding to God's grace in worship and service, and understanding that the Holy Spirit is always telling us "I gave you a land on which you had not labored, and towns that you had not built, and you live in them; you eat the fruit of vineyards and oliveyards that you did not plant". The fruits of our ministry in this community, are sown by the Holy Spirit, who has already gone out ahead of us, who promises to give life to our actions. And it is within this promise of the life giving Holy Spirit, that we will serve the Lord.