

Pentecost 14 B 2024

Joshua 24: 1-2a, 14-18; John 6: 56-69

August 25, 2024

I remember a conversation with a church member a few years ago. This person had not come from a Lutheran background and struggled with the liturgy—particularly the repetition—week to week—of the same words. It didn't seem as genuine or meaningful—and was maybe even a little boring.

I'm sure she wasn't the only one experiencing worship that way because the ELCA—the larger national church—changed some of the prayers. There are now seasonal prayers for Confession and Forgiveness, the Offertory Prayer, the Post-Communion prayer and the Dismissal. I appreciate those changes and the freshness they bring.

But there is one part of the liturgy—the Gospel Acclamation—that I would be happy if it never changed—even during Lent. “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.”

We heard these words as part of our Gospel reading today. I don't know if they affect anyone else in the same way. But for me they are the words of the liturgy that speak the deepest truth I know—and my heart opens up every time I sing them.

In today's Gospel, we get to hear the context for these words from our liturgy. Jesus has just finished his Bread of Life teaching,

and many of his disciples are not enthusiastically embracing it. Jesus asks them if it offends them and many of them answer by walking away. Jesus turns to the 12—the closest followers—and asks a heart-breaking question, “Do *you* also want to leave me?”

And Peter—always the one to speak without thinking—says, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.”

One commentator says it’s not clear whether these are words of desperation or exultation. Is Peter saying, “we don’t have anywhere else to go—we’ve exhausted all our other options”? Or is he saying, “there’s no one who compares to you—why would we go somewhere else”?

I hear these words as both—“I’ve reached a dead end—I don’t have anywhere else I can go”, *and* “You are the only One who is able to help.” It’s both desperation and an acknowledgement of the greatness of God all rolled into one. Maybe that’s why I connect with these words so much. It expresses the truth of where I am better than anything I could ever say.

Simon Peter speaks for himself and the rest of the 12 disciples. But clearly, there were other options and most of the others did not see Jesus in the same way.

It’s a similar situation with the people of Israel and Joshua in our first reading. They’ve been wandering in the desert, and they’ve

been wandering away from God. They're questioning where God is leading them—what kind of freedom is this anyway--walking around in the wilderness for years? Serving the Lord hasn't worked out the way they thought it would.

Joshua challenges them to choose who they will serve—either the Lord or one of the gods of their ancestors or one of the gods of the people they are living among now. There are options.

A god is someone or something that you revere and honor above everything else. Someone or something you put your fundamental trust in.

I've been thinking about the other gods that I serve—serve in the sense that I put a lot of energy and attention toward them. They might not be so different from the ones that draw your attention and consume your energy.

Accomplishment is one—and it's closely related to another one, achievement. Recognition is another—getting credit. Fairness is another—especially being treated fairly and having others think I treat people fairly. Being organized is one—though you'd never guess that looking at my desk or my house right now. Spending my time well is in the mix, too. And certainly, one of the big ones is *security*.

I don't think any of this is bad per se. I think some of it is very human. The problem is a lot of the time these relatively good values get out of place. They become all important and what they all have in common is that they have *me* at the center—not God.

Our competing gods also shape how we see God instead of the other way around. When accomplishment is at the center for me, I make the Lord God into my own image. I think things like, “why isn't God accomplishing peace in Gaza? What kind of god is that?” I want a god who can get things done.

For the Israelites, it was easy to believe in the Lord God who parted the Red Sea and led them out of Egypt. But not so easy to believe in that same God when you've been hiking in the wilderness of Sinai, essentially going around in circles for years, wondering whether God is going to keep the promise of the Promised Land.

Joshua basically says, God is the one who is with us on this journey.

Peter saw the same thing in Jesus—God who is with us on the journey—the journey of being human with all of its trials and joys. The One who travels with us—the One who is there to turn to at any point along the way. The One whose presence is life.

There is an unusual Girl Scout troop in New York City. Troop 6000 meets every Thursday night, in a basement of a hotel that has been turned into an emergency shelter for migrant families who are in the asylum process. There are 200,000 asylum seekers in New York City—and undoubtedly, many of them went there because New York City has a right to shelter law. Many judge that law as ridiculous policy. And I think we'd also judge it as being amazingly in line with the Kingdom of God Jesus proclaimed was already here among us.

Troop 6000 started in 2017, as a Girl Scout troop for girls in the family shelter system in New York City. When the asylum seekers arrived, they reached out to them. They do all the things I remember doing as a Girl Scout—saying the Girl Scout promise, crafts, badges, field trips, camping—and ending every meeting with the friendship circle. They also help the girls acclimate to their new life by teaching them how the subway system and local government work.

Most importantly the troop gives the girls a place to be kids—a place where the pressure is off—and a place to belong. One of the leaders, Santiago, came from Guatemala, decades ago, as a child. She remembers how hard it was—how she was laughed at. And she shares with the girls, "I want to be here to support you, to let you know that even in this new, big world here in New York that looks so

dreadful, we can conquer it with confidence, with character and with courage."

One of the troop members, Valentina, had come from Ecuador with her parents. They sold the restaurant they owned and fled when gang members started killing people who wouldn't sell cocaine for them. They didn't have enough money to bring their whole family, so they made the excruciating decision to leave Valentina's two siblings behind.

Every Thursday night, Valentina gets a break from the pressures in her life and has the joy of being able to be herself—to laugh and cry with people who know and love her. The troop is making the final plans for a camping trip and Valentina tells the leaders she won't be able to go because of a city policy that says families can only be housed for 60 days at a time. Her family will need to leave the shelter for a few days, which also means she will not be able to go on the camping trip. Valentina breaks down crying and the leaders do, too.

Troop 6000 is a place of solidarity, support, belonging, growing. Even in the midst of a life that is filled with hardship and insecurity, *it is a place of life.*

That's a picture of who Jesus is for us. That's the picture of a God we can turn to at any moment because God is with us.

It's also a picture of who we are for each other—and who we *can* be for others as we open ourselves and extend ourselves to people who need to experience the love and presence of Jesus through us.

“Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.”

Thanks be to God. Amen.