

Weekly Reading – Monday, August 3, 2009

Here are my comments on the readings for Sunday, August 9, 2009, which is Proper 14. In the first Old Testament selection the story of David is moving towards its end. The Gospel reading is the third of five from John 6, a challenging chapter.

II Samuel 18: 5 - 9, 15, 31 - 33

It now seems a long time ago that David was the handsome, young shepherd boy called from following the flocks to champion the Lord's cause. Power, intrigue, deceit, and grief now shadow the aging King. Reading this story I did think of the phrase "Biblical Family Values" pushed by some for a while. Here's another sort of biblical family, perhaps one closer to many contemporary families. Son, Absalom, is in open rebellion against his father. David, for his part, has his troops put down the rebellion and yet he loves Absalom. If at the beginning of the Davidic narrative we see a young man exhibiting Kierkegaard's "purity of heart" (to will one thing), we now see a man divided in his heart and loyalties. Joab, the soldier, suffers no such division. He dispatches the caught Absalom. But David's grief is great. What poignant words, the grief of a father for his son. And where is God in all this? For a time it appeared that David was God, that he was in charge. When he forgot his own contingency and mortal nature, trouble came. It's clear now, David is not God, only God is God.

I Kings 19: 4 - 8

The typological Old Testament lesson is a less obvious companion to the gospel reading than some. This is a scene from Elijah's flight toward Mount Horeb when threatened by Jezebel and Ahab. On the journey, the discouraged prophet is ready to give up and die, but he is miraculously fed and nourished in order that he may continue. God intrudes, with grace and care, into Elijah's world. So the connection to the gospel reading will be found in Jesus the bread of life. Jesus himself is the bread for the journey. One might either enlarge the reading to take in more of the prophet's journey and its climactic scene at Mt. Horeb or reference that larger story in preaching if this is your chosen text. It is the story of one who encountered not only mercy but also a chastening in the meeting with God who asks Elijah, "What are you doing here?"

Ephesians 4: 25 - 5: 2\

The opening words, "So then," reference the new creation in Christ of the preceding verses, ". . . the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness." Ethics, and the list of imperatives which are the substance of today's text, is a response to the gift of grace and new life in Christ. "So then," means, "given this, how are you to live?" The stress is on behaviors that build up the community, for "we are members one of another." (vs. 25) In some sense the current economic crisis provides an inverse testimony to the same point: forgetting we are in it together, that we are "members one of another" things go badly. Verse 26 is provocative, "Be angry, but do not sin." Anger is not a sin, but it can take you there. A helpful distinction. "Do not let the sun go down on our

anger." Appropos that, here's a prayer, "When I am About to go to Bed Angry," written by friend Martin Copenhaver. It appears in a little booklet, "A Book of Uncommon Prayer," done by our Writer's Group.

"Dear God, in the Bible it says, 'Do not let the sun go down on your anger,' but I am about to do just that. I am angry. My anger seems to be outlasting the sun. I am not ready to let it go. This is a prayer that I am offering through clenched teeth. Help me to know what I am to do now. Have it out and seek resolution? Just let it go? Or, is this something I can entrust to you for the night in the hope that, when the morning comes, I will have calmed down a bit and the way will seem clearer? Help me know what I am supposed to do. And then give me the courage or compassion or whatever else it may take to move beyond anger to reconciliation. If I could do this without your help, I would have done it already. Amen." (You can order A Book of Uncommon Prayers by calling 800-537-3394, \$5.95 a copy).

John 6: 35, 41 - 51

As is the pattern in John, a miracle or sign is followed by long discussion and discourse or teaching. So the chapter that began with the feeding of the 5,000 becomes an extended exploration of Jesus the Bread of Life. There are three successive groups which engage or are engaged by Jesus in discussion: the crowd (last week), the Jews (this week and next), and the disciples (fifth week). I believe it fair and helpful to render "the Jews" as "the religious authorities." This encounter is a bit reminiscent of the one between John the Baptist and the priest and Levites in chapter one, vs.19 and following. There they try to fit John into one of their pre-existing categories or boxes. Here the religious authorities do something similar. In this portrayal, religion is only part of a world that is sealed off from, not really open, to God. Religion means we have the answers, things are set and settled. Either you fit into the way we've got things figured out or you don't fit. Today in thinking about God people want to define God according to our world and its categories, but God (by definition) exists beyond those categories. Then there is, in this text, the paradox of faith itself. Faith is a gift, and yet openness is required. Something of that paradox is caught in the words of a Sufi master, Abu Yazid al-Bistami who said, "This thing we tell you of can never be found by seeking, yet only seekers find it." So "the Jews" here are not seekers--religion can do that to us. And yet, "No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me," which rhymes, so to speak, with, "this thing can never be found by seeking." A delightful paradox.