

The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 10)
July 11, 2021
The Rev. Jedediah D. Holdorph
Trinity Episcopal Church, Bend

Amos 7:7-15
Psalm 85:8-13
Ephesians 1:3-14
Mark 6:14-29

Church building closed due to COVID-19 (Coronavirus) pandemic: the church is open at www.trinitybend.org.

“Coffee With Jesus” is the name of an edgy comic, not everyone’s “cup of tea.” It’s often funny, sometimes poignant and (not uncommonly) provocative. Occasionally uncomfortable.

The characters are highly stylized. Jesus is always the same, his face evocative perhaps of how we grew up imagining Jesus in Sunday School. But he’s wearing a suit and he’s holding a cup of coffee. Hence the name of the comic: “Coffee with Jesus.” And this Jesus – like the one in the gospels – is willing to sit down for coffee with just about anyone and everyone.

This past week, Jesus sat down for a cup of coffee with someone named Carl. And Carl is struggling. We’re not told what troubles him. He might be a terrible sinner. Or he may just be overly self-critical. All we can infer is that he’s struggling. And this is their conversation:

Carl: Once again, Jesus! Here we are!
How often do we have to have this conversation?

Jesus: It does seem to come up frequently, Carl.
And you know ... that’s not necessarily a bad thing.

Carl: When will I get it right?
When will I stop disappointing you?

Jesus: I scoff at your “disappointing you” remark, Carl. *Loudly.* With a snort almost.
So let’s keep having this conversation, yeah?

“... let’s keep having this conversation.” Jesus tells Carl that the conversation is the point. “Let’s keep the dialog open. We’ll get there ... together. Keep coming to me, for ‘I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life.’”ⁱ

It’s not at all obvious, but I hear an echo of that in our readings this morning. On the face of it, in our first reading, from the Book of Joshua, we hear about a “one-and-done” moment of decision for God’s people. The way the story is told this is a pivotal moment. Joshua has picked up where Moses left off and completed the Exodus. He has led the people into God’s promised land and now he reminds them of all that God had done for them.

Joshua has summoned the leaders of the people, the elders, the heads, the judges, the officers. They stand with him in front of the assembly, and Joshua tells everyone that they have a choice to make. They can choose to stay stuck in their past, devoted to the gods worshiped by their ancestors, or they can embrace a new future and worship the God who has given them so much.

It's a moment of high drama. And Joshua leads by example:

... as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.

And in short order, the people, in one voice, say the same:

Far be it for us that we should forsake the LORD ...

They recount for themselves the story of God's unfailing love for them, the love that set them free and protected them along all the way they went. They promise that they, too, will serve God – the God who has given them so very much. It seems like an easy choice – one and done ... univocal, unequivocal, irrevocable ... between false gods who did nothing for them and the true and living God who set them free.

If this were all we knew about these people, this would be a happy ending.

But we do know more about these people. We stop one verse too soon this morning. For in the very next verse, Joshua – having heard their fine words – tells them a hard truth. He tells them:

You can't do it; you won't be able to do what you promise. Joshua 24:19 (paraphrased)

Now, before you think this is bad news, let me remind you of the point of all that follows. The rest of the biblical history tells us Joshua was right:

the people couldn't remain true to their word when they were ruled by judges;
they couldn't choose to serve God wholeheartedly when they were a united monarchy;
and they couldn't do so in the northern kingdom,
nor in the southern kingdom.

So what does God do with the people, God's chosen people who cannot choose God?

God sticks with them. Not because they lived up to their word, but because God chose them and "kept the conversation" going with them. "... let's keep the conversation going."

And that, I think, is the proper point for us to notice as we hear this morning's gospel.

This, too, is sounds like a "one-and-done" moment of decision for Jesus' closest disciples.

For the past several weeks, we've been reading from the 6th chapter of John. We started with the feeding of some 5,000 people. As John tells it, the crowds saw Jesus as someone like Moses who provided food for their desperate need. But as they hear more of what he has to say to them, it begins to sink in that Jesus is serving up more than a free meal.

As Marianne Borg said in her sermon last week, there's more at stake here than a theological debate about what happens to the bread and wine during the Eucharistic liturgy. This is about who Jesus is and who he wants us to become. Jesus is God in flesh and blood. And he offers himself to us all, telling us to ingest him, that we, too, may incarnate God, that we, too, might be reshaped to be flesh and blood manifestations of the love and grace of God in the world.

He manages to offend just about everyone. The religious authorities denounced him for claiming too much about himself. The crowds just wanted to be fed, not changed.

In any event, by the time we pick up the story this morning, it seems that most everyone has moved on. It looks like Jesus is left teaching a relative few disciples. (More than the twelve we know by name, but it's clearly a whole lot fewer gathering in the synagogue that day than the 5,000 Jesus started with up on the mountainside.) And even the faithful who have stuck with Jesus to this point are having a hard time with what Jesus is saying:

This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?

"The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life,"

Jesus says, and yet he knows some of those hearing his words cannot believe them – cannot trust the words he speaks nor the invitation he offers. And he was right, of course. For as John goes on to tell us, "many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him."

And then comes a moment of decision for those few who remain. Jesus turns to them and asks:

Do you wish also to go away?

And Peter, speaking for them all, says,

Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life ...

I have to believe that Peter meant those words from the bottom of his heart as he spoke them. Jesus had shown him something more about life than he ever imagined back when he'd been a simple fisherman. As hard as the calling to follow might prove to be, it would be harder still to fit himself back into serving as a cog in the heartless established Roman order. Jesus had invited him to trust that there is more to life than that. So Peter promises to stay. He has no place he'd rather be than anywhere in the company of Jesus. It seems like a clear choice – one and done – between a dead-end past and a life-giving future.

And if this were all we knew about Peter and the others for whom he speaks, this would be a happy ending.

But, alas, we do know more about them. And as with our first reading this morning, we stop one or two verses too soon here too. For in the very next verses, Jesus speaks of betrayal:

Jesus answered them, "Did I not choose you, the twelve? Yet one of you is a devil." He was speaking of Judas son of Simon Iscariot, for he, though one of the twelve, was going to betray him. John 6:70-71

But before you think this is bad news, let me underscore something we might have failed to hear. Jesus says, "I chose you. I chose you, not merely knowing that you weren't up to all that I'm asking of you, I chose you, even knowing that one of you would betray me."

Their stumbling, even Judas' betrayal, isn't the point for us to fixate on. "I chose you," Jesus says first, suggesting (I think) that we'd do well to stick as close as we can to one who loves us not merely when we get the answers right, but especially when we're struggling to come up with any answer at all, not merely when we get the answers right and live up to the words we say, but especially when we predictably fail to live up to our highest aspirations and best intentions. That's why I started off this morning with that "Coffee with Jesus" comic.

Carl: When will I get it right?
When will I stop disappointing you?

Jesus: I scoff at your "disappointing you" remark, Carl. *Loudly.* With a snort almost.
So let's keep having this conversation, yeah?

Yeah, let's keep having that conversation with the one who chooses to keep talking with us, especially when he offers himself to us as "the Way, the Truth, and the Life."

¹ David Wilkie @ <https://www.facebook.com/RadioFreeBabylon/photos/a.2731389056888620/4756694337691405/?type=3>:

