

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 14) – Year B – August 9, 2009
2 Samuel 18:5-9, 15, 31-33; Psalm 130; Ephesians 4:25-5:2; John 6:35, 41-51
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It's that time of year again. The stores are full of "Back to School" gear. For some, the new school year has just started. For others, the end of the summer break is just days away. For most of us, that deeply ingrained school-year rhythm it still with us. This week I had the most vivid memory of my first biology class at high school. In retrospect, it's obvious to me now that the teacher had worked really hard to set up an interesting and fun class for us all. All around the lab were jars, tanks, boxes, and specimens. Bright colors and curious creatures. In biology, the word classification is about taxonomy. The eight taxonomic ranks have long been defined as: domain, kingdom, phylum, class, order, family, genus and species. I guess we were all so excited about the lab time that no one was paying too much attention to the fact that we were supposed to be making notes and learning about how to classify the plants and animals correctly. At the end of the class, our homework assignment was to do just that. I was not the only one who was grumbling. After all I had not really paid that much attention as I wandered from station to station. I would pay the price for my laissez-faire attitude later that evening with hours of research, and that all long before the Internet!

Today's reading from John's Gospel continues Jesus' scandalous discourse about who He really is, where He came from, and the works of God He is performing for the life of the world. He has just told the crowd, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." In this passage, we hear the official response from the leaders of Jesus' own Judean community, and it isn't good. Jesus' claims about Himself and even His wondrous signs make no sense to the leaders of the synagogue. They are the teachers and leaders, they are the ones who are supposed to understand the scriptures intimately, and yet they do not recognize anything prophetic or divine in Jesus' words or deeds. And even if they do, then they are evidently feeling very threatened. In fact, many of the Judean leaders sound a lot like the Israelites in the wilderness who grumbled to Moses about their new and uncertain circumstances, despite the fact that they had just been freed from slavery in Egypt. The verbal dueling between the Judean leaders and Jesus is equally telling. With a glaring lack of humility, they are convinced that they know precisely how to classify Jesus and where he is really from. Without prayerful discernment, they have immediately pointed to Jesus and classified Him as purely human: "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know?" This is the beginning of what I think is actually the very first split in the church. The parting of ways between two Jewish sects -- the one that follows the teachings of Jesus eventually becomes known as The Way, and finally as Christianity; the other is the forerunner of modern Judaism.

Jesus never deviates from His rightful claim and never abdicates His authority. His response follows a perfect logic that lovingly bears witness to His detractors, whilst addressing their comments completely in terms that they are trained to understand. In other words, Jesus meets us all exactly where we are, and gives us all precisely what we need to see and hear the truth. Frequently that isn't what we have asked for, or what we want. Let's examine Jesus' fourfold response, which is then followed by the reiteration of who He is, and how He is to accomplish His divine purpose in and through His own flesh and blood. There is much we can all learn here. Jesus' first response is, "do not complain among yourselves." As we have just seen, for the Judeans this is a stark reminder of the Exodus, where their ancestors ate the manna given by God. Yet because of their consistent faithlessness and disobedience most never set foot in the Promised Land, including Moses. For you and me, there is the obvious admonishment to avoid the evils of gossiping. Yet underlying Jesus' words isn't there just a hint of two other important areas of discontent that seem to be flourishing in epidemic proportions in the modern world. The first is a general lack of perspective around just how blessed we are. I don't know how many of you have ever read Stephen King's book, *The Shawshank Redemption* or seen the movie, but it does contain a great example to this point. In the book, one of the prison guards is overhead talking with his

buddy, while a group of prisoners nearby are working on sealing the building roof with hot pitch. The guard has just received a rather large one-time monetary gift, and instead of thanking God for his good fortune he's complaining bitterly about the tax bill he will have to pay. His glass is definitely half empty. Closely linked with the attitude of grumbling ingratitude is the second issue that Jesus may well be speaking to us about in this Scripture. It is the sense of entitlement that seems to have trampled roughshod over basic common sense. Here's just one example: the person who successfully sued a major fast food chain because their coffee was hot, but did not have a warning label on the cup. I'm sure you can think of other examples!

Moving on. In points two, three and four of Jesus' response He then makes it one hundred percent clear that no one can claim to know anything about Him— from His true identity, to where He came from, to where He is going, except through the initiative and work of God's grace. Jesus has chosen His words carefully. If the leaders of the synagogue really knew their Scripture then they would know that the prophets have always preached about the attractive power of God's love. Hosea (11:4) tells us that God has drawn us with cords of love. In the Greek translation of Jeremiah (31:3) it says, "I have drawn you with an everlasting love". It is the same word for 'drawn' as the one used in John's Gospel. Jesus' claims are simply the Truth with a capital "T"! The initiative always rests in God's desire and pursuit of His children. The inability of the Judean leaders to hear and see the truth of Jesus was the product of hubris. Once again, Jesus tells us that all who accept God's gracious gift of faith and come to Him will have life everlasting. A great image for the constant relevance of the Word is like the sound bouncing off the walls of a huge canyon. Scripture echoes and resonates across the centuries, and that means that this passage is not trapped in the past, but is alive and well today. Jesus refers again to Scripture. In Isaiah (54:13) the prophet says this, "All your children shall be taught by the Lord...." Then in another allusion to the prophet Jeremiah (31:34) Jesus says that if we are teachable, then His truth will be irresistible. Given the poor effort on our first assignment, I think my old biology teacher was convinced that the class was unteachable! There are many people in the world, sadly even amongst the Body of Christ, who believe that they have already plumbed the depths, harvested the heights, and completed their homework on Jesus. If that kind of misplaced pride weren't such a tragedy, it would be laughable.

At the end of last week, I invited us to pray about the question, "In the midst -- and perhaps burden? -- of our affluence, do you and I truly know what it means to be hungry? The Judean leaders in conflict with Jesus were confident that they had everything they needed to know God. They are full with all manner of manna, unable to taste and see that the Lord is good; that the Lord Jesus is, in fact, the true bread from heaven. They are teachers of the Law, but basically unteachable. Jesus, who has come to fulfill the Law and the prophets, does not fit their traditional classification system and so the bread of life is dismissed. For you and me there is great opportunity here. God, the lover of our souls, is still pursuing our hearts and minds, still offering new insights and revelations of divine grace. The classroom doors are open, and we are always welcome to go back to school. If you and I are truly hungry and thirsty for our Lord, then perhaps now is the time to put our own faith under God's microscope. Maybe now is the time to examine where we too are in need of wisdom and growth. God is waiting and listening for each of our hearts to respond.

Amen.