

2 Samuel 18: 5 - 9, 15, 31 - 33
Psalm 130
Year B, 10th Sunday of Pentecost

Ephesians 4: 25 - 5: 2
John 6: 35, 41 - 51
August 9, 2009

Where are you from?

“Where are you from?” The question is simple enough. On the one hand, we all have an idea of how to answer this question. We can give a quick, one-off location and not think too deeply on the answer, “I am from Memphis” or “I am from Chicago.” This gives us a broad answer about a person without delving too deeply. On the other hand, this simple question, “Where are you from”, can have a much more pointed intention. I should say that the question means something completely different when asked south of the Sweet-tea line. Once upon a time the Mason-Dixon line determined if you were in the South, but today the marker for reaching the culture of the South is the Sweet-tea line. Simply put, this imaginary line is crossed when you do not have to ask at a restaurant if their tea is sweet because that is the **ONLY** way they serve it! When someone born and raised south of the Sweet-tea Line asks you, “Where are you from?” you cannot answer simply “Memphis” or “Chicago”. They want to know where you were born and raised, where did you learn your manners, and who are your people. The question is a prelude to understanding everything about that person based on your history. “Where are you from?”

This seemingly simple question permeates our Gospel reading today. Actually, truth be told, the question is an obsession for the entirety of the Gospel of John. Starting at the beginning, John is trying to make it clear exactly who Jesus is because of where he has come from! With those majestic words of the prologue, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God.” We continue our slow, relentless march

through the sixth chapter of John with the continuation of Jesus' declaration, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." (John 6: 35) Jesus is making a bold claim. He has to know that such a comment will provoke a response from many.

Just such a group shows up to respond to Jesus' comment. They are a good group of Southern Jews, likely raised somewhere South of the Sweet-tea line themselves. They become upset because they know Jesus. To paraphrase their comments: "Hey, we know this guy! He is a kid from small-town Nazareth. We know where he went to school, who his friends are, and all the silly things he used to do there. We know his mama and his whole family! Who does he think he is talking about coming down from heaven?! We know where he is from!"

Jesus' response appears to ignore the gripping and focuses on his other hometown, "No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me . . . Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me." (John 6:44 - 45) In classic John format, a seemingly straightforward question or comment or complaint leads us quickly into the deep end of the theological pool. Critics jump on these statements and try to find a way through. We can hear the arguments of pre-destination when the Father first draws people to Jesus. God has seemingly pre-selected those who will make it. At the same time, Jesus seems to affirm human free-will when he speaks of people choosing to learn from the Father and selecting to eat the bread of life. There is some hint and indication that human response, choice and action is required. Depending on which critic you read, one theory will be promoted at the expense of the other. We are pre-destined for salvation or we have the free-will to choose our own path to God. We focus either on God or on Man.

Critics feel the need to choose. Of course, we tend to forget where Jesus came from.

Instead, we get caught up on who we are in the equation. We confuse our importance in the midst of Jesus' invitation. I am reminded of the story of a military cargo plane. The plane flying over a populated area, suddenly loses power and starts to nose down. The pilot tries to pull up, but with all their cargo, the plane is too heavy. So he yells to the soldiers in back to throw things out to make the plane lighter. They throw out a pistol. "Throw out more!" shouts the pilot. So they throw out a rifle. "More!" he cries again. They heave out a missile, and the pilot regains control.

He pulls out of the dive and lands safely at an airport. They get into a jeep and drive off. Pretty soon they meet a boy on the side of the road who's crying. They ask him why he's crying and he says "A pistol hit me on the head!" They drive more and meet another boy who's crying even harder. Again they ask why and the boy says, "A rifle hit me on the head!" They apologize and keep driving. They meet a boy on the sidewalk who's laughing hysterically. They ask him, "Kid, what's so funny?" The boy replies, "I sneezed and a house blew up!" Theologically speaking, we are often that last boy. We think that we did something pretty spectacular that actually is initiated by someone else.

The reality of this passage is that God starts all of this but not as pre-destination. If we go back to the beginning, we remember that God creates us, God loves us, God keeps coming again and again to help us. Where are we from in the first place? God. He is the one who gave us that first breath from a life-less piece of clay. At the same time, we are this human creature granted the gift and burden of free-will. We can choose how we respond to that love. We can accept it or reject it or, like most of us, do our best to remember that is it being offered at all!

The funniest thing about the critics of these passages is that they forget just where Jesus is from. He is fully the Jewish boy, son of Mary, raised in small-town Nazareth. He is completely human and understands our struggles and worries and stress related to that free-will. He is also fully God, present at creation, part of the Trinity, utterly divine. He is one who initiates our relationship and attempts to sustain it. Where is he from? Both heaven and earth. He is two in one and we have been struggling to understand who he is ever since. In the same way, we struggle with where we are from. We forget that we are created by God. We forget that we are just as much from the hand of the Creator as we are from our own small-towns. We struggle to find a way forward.

Where are you from? The answer is personified in Christ. The answer rises in the wonderful collect this morning that gives us the good news: “we, who cannot exist without you, may BY YOU be enabled to live according to your will.” We are God’s creatures, loved and invited into relationship and possessing the free-will to accept or reject that love. The blessing can be found in Christ leading the Way, in Christ the small-town Jewish boy, and in Christ the eternal God- offering himself as bread at this table. Now, can we recall, where are we from?