

Difficult Discipleship  
Joshua 5:1-12

None of this makes a whole lot of sense to us, does it? I mean, we generally try to make life easy for ourselves and our loved ones. We try to make the most practical decisions we can in order to smooth out the rough patches along our way. But in today's passage, God doesn't seem to be interested in any of that. Instead, He seems to be trying to make things tough for His people.

Let's take circumcision, the rather strange ritual that takes up the lion's share of this passage. Now, Joshua didn't just dream up the idea of removing a flap of skin that covers part of the male reproductive organ. No, way back in Genesis chapter 17, God had told Abraham that he and all his male descendants would have to go through this painful and frankly humiliating process as a way of indicating that they were part of the covenant community. But on that occasion, God told Abraham that boy babies should be circumcised when they were eight days old. So, why did so many adult men need to go through this process in today's passage?

Well, it turns out that their parents had lost faith in God. Now, verse 4 tells us that their grandparents, who had been slaves in Egypt, had indeed circumcised their male infants. In spite of the fact that Pharaoh had commanded all the male Israelite infants to be killed, their grandparents had not only kept many of their boy babies alive, but had put an irreversible mark of the covenant on them. In spite of their physical captivity, they thus remained faithful to God.

But their parents, the generation that left Egypt, the adults who saw all the plagues that came on the Egyptians, the men and women who walked through the Red Sea on dry ground and who then heard God's Ten Commandments thundered from the top of Mt. Sinai – well, they were not so faithful. Verse 6 reminds us that the reason they had to spend 40 years wandering in the desert was because in spite of the many mighty miracles they had seen, they did not believe that God would bring them into the Promised Land. Instead, they rebelled against God and determined to go back to Egypt. And one of the ways they had expressed their rebellion was a refusal to circumcise their male children, giving them the sign of the covenant.

Now, since the coming of Christ, it is not necessary for Christians to go through this ritual, which was an obvious foreshadowing of the blood that would be shed by Jesus, a male descendant of Abraham. Today, men and women, boys and girls are ushered into the covenant community through the waters of baptism. But the need for all of Joshua's warriors to undergo this process does tell us a lot about what it means to be a follower of Christ, even in today's world. For it reminds us that the pursuit of purity is often as painful as it is necessary.

Think about it. In verse 9, Joshua points to the imagery of circumcision as partly that of cleansing, rolling away an impurity from the body as a way of symbolizing our deeper, more urgent need to be spiritually cleansed from sin. And baptism points to the same truth – as our bodies are washed with water, we are claiming the cleansing power of the Holy Spirit as we trust in the sacrifice of Christ for our salvation.

But baptism isn't the end of our sanctification, our process of becoming more like Christ – it's only the beginning of that lifelong journey. For remember – the first thing Jesus did after His own baptism was to go into the desert for a 40 day period of fasting and temptation. Just so, baptism may not be as painful or humiliating as circumcision, but it ushers us into a life of discipleship that is often just as difficult.

For let's face it – living according to God's perfect law of love, turning away from self and putting the needs of others first is never easy. Putting aside selfish habits and desires is seldom pleasant. Stepping outside our comfort zones so that we can bear witness to Christ in the unbelieving world around us is never comfortable. As Joshua's sore soldiers could tell us, the pursuit of personal holiness is hard, painful work.

And we see a similar truth expressed through another strange event that we find at the very end of this passage – the fact that God stopped sending manna to His people. Remember, He had been showering them with miraculous food from Heaven ever since Exodus chapter 16, not long after they had departed from Egypt. But now, just as soon as God made it possible for them to cross over the Jordan River into the Promised Land, just as soon as they were able to forage off of the land which God was promising to give to them, God abruptly turned off the tap – there was no more manna. From that point on, they would have to fend for themselves.

Now, at first glance, that doesn't sound like a very loving thing to do, does it? And it certainly doesn't fit in with the way we pray so much of the time: "God, ease our suffering. God do a miracle for me. God change my heart so that I'll want what you want." Now, there's nothing wrong with asking for any of those things. But I wonder if underlying those kinds of prayers is an expectation that God is going to make it easy to follow Him, that God is going to remove the need for us to expend any effort or go through any suffering in this world in order to advance the cause of His Kingdom.

Now, it's true that there are lots of impossible things that we can't do for ourselves. Just as God's people couldn't cross the Jordan River without miraculous intervention from God, so we can't give ourselves new spiritual life. We can't save ourselves from bondage to sin. No, just as we rely on God for regeneration and justification, we need His power to fill us each and every day. But as we confess our dependence on God for our salvation and empowerment, it is all too easy to go a bit too far and expect God to keep on doing everything for us, even those things He wants us to do for ourselves.

Remember: God stopped giving miraculous manna to His people once they could feed themselves. Just so, there plenty of things we ourselves can do to advance the cause of Christ. So why should we expect God to bless us and our loved ones unless we are seeking His face in prayer? Why should we expect God to guide and direct us if we're not taking the trouble to seek His will in His Word? Why should we expect God to bring more people to faith in Him if we aren't praying for them and setting a good example for them and inviting them to join us in following Jesus?

No, just as God gave Joshua's people a fertile land which they could farm, God has given us the ordinary means of grace for us to use: prayer, Scripture, and the sacraments. Moreover, God has poured out His Holy Spirit on all who have placed their trust in Christ – that's what the waters of baptism symbolize. So, since God has thus empowered us for ministry, why shouldn't we expect to get busy for Him, doing what we can to bring Him glory and to do good for others? Why should we expect God to shower us with fast food from Heaven when we've got plenty of tomatoes to pick and corn to shuck and peas to shell?

But there's one another rather unpleasant truth we can learn from today's passage. For if we learn that the pursuit of personal purity and holiness is hard work, and if we learn that God expects us to do the work for Him that He has empowered us to do, we also find that faithfulness to God often involves a great amount of vulnerability. Simply put, following Jesus often requires us to let our guard down, perhaps even to open ourselves up to attack.

That was certainly the case for Joshua's soldiers, wasn't it? I mean, if they had to go through the painful, temporarily disabling ritual of circumcision, wouldn't it have made a lot more sense for them to

have done it while they were camped out on the east side of the river? Chapter 3 and verse 2 tells us that they were there for three days, which would have given them a good start on the healing process. Moreover, God had already defeated Sihon and Og, the kings who lived on that side of the river. That meant that His warriors would have been relatively safe until they were fit to fight again. And while they were recovering from their surgery, the impassable Jordan would have formed an effective barrier against any sneak attacks their remaining enemies on the west bank might have tried to launch.

But instead of asking them to do what was safe and reasonable, God miraculously led them across the impassable river only to have Joshua plop them down just a couple of miles from Jericho and have all his warriors make themselves temporarily unfit for combat. What kind of sense does that make?

Well, whether it makes sense or not, such vulnerability is a key component of following Jesus. For as Joshua's warriors did something so nonsensical, what statement were they making to the unbelieving world? "We don't have to worry about anything you might try to do to us. We have complete confidence in our God's ability to fight for us and to protect us." It was precisely their willingness to make themselves vulnerable that communicated their trust in God most clearly.

But they weren't the only ones who were willing to make themselves vulnerable for the sake of the gospel. I mean, don't we believe the testimony of the apostles precisely because they were willing to be killed rather than to deny the truth about Jesus? And in our own personal experience, don't we have the most respect for those sincere Christians who are willing to be open about their weaknesses, who are willing to confess their sinfulness, who are as honest about their need for the power of Christ as they are confident in His ability and willingness to show Himself strong on their behalf? Come to think of it, how can any of us ever hope to bear witness to the grace and love of Christ unless we are equally open and honest and transparent and vulnerable to unbelievers?

And let's face it – such vulnerability isn't any more optional for us than it was for those soldiers who followed Joshua. For in our responsive reading, didn't Jesus specifically tell us to love our enemies and to bless those who persecute us? Didn't He say that if someone strikes us we must turn the other cheek and let him hit us again? Didn't he say that if someone unjustly takes our shirt from us we should also give him our coat? No, a true follower of Christ simply has to be vulnerable to others.

And come to think of it, didn't Jesus actually do the same sort of thing? Look at how He chose to be born – you can't get much more vulnerable than a baby born to parents so poor they had to put their newborn in a feedbox. And in spite of His ability to walk on the water and heal the sick, Jesus gave Himself up into the hands of His enemies, allowing them to crucify Him. He humbled Himself before a world full of sinners, opening Himself up to scorn and abuse and even death itself because that was God's will for Him, and because that's the only way He could save any of us.

Yes, it is this Jesus Who was tempted in the desert Who calls us to pursue holiness, no matter how painful it might be. It is this Jesus Who left all the comforts and joys of Heaven to share the pain and sorrow of our world who calls us to do what we can for Him, no matter how difficult it might be. And it is this Jesus Who laid down His life for us Who calls us to make ourselves vulnerable to one another, no matter how dangerous it might be. If we say we want to follow Him, if we say we want to be like Him, can there be any other way?