

21st Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle B
Joshua 24:1-2A, 15-17, 18B
Psalm 34:2-3, 16-17, 18-19, 20-21
Ephesians 5:21-32
John 6:60-69
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Every human being is unique in the sight of God. Some human characteristics, however, are nearly universal. For instance, just about everyone who has a license thinks they are a better than average driver. Never mind that this is statistically absurd. And however obvious our follies may be to others, virtually all of us are confident that we are brimming over with common sense. Similarly, we all like to believe that we have an eye for a bargain. Real bargains, successfully secured, are the battle laurels of our consumer society. We brag about our acquisitions the way ancient warriors boasted of their exploits in war. Our purchases are our trophies. When we come away from an encounter with an automobile sales person, or with a dealer at a flea market, confident that we have prevailed, it's as if we are champions in a medieval tournament who have unhorsed the black knight.

But the passionate yearning for the maximum discount, wars in the human heart with the terrible fear of being sold a bill of goods. The old saw "You get what you pay for" haunts us. Few remarks cause more conflicting emotions than the claim, "I can get it for you wholesale" or, "For you, I'll make a special deal." Was that sales clerk who insisted the sports coat at the summer sale fit perfectly across my shoulders and made me look ten pounds thinner, laughing behind my back when I walked

out of the shop with my purchase? Did your brother-in-law really get you that microwave at cost?

As is so often the case, I think we apply these instincts from our everyday life, to our lives of faith. Are the claims of our religion true, or are we making fools of ourselves? In our readings today we find people asking similar questions.

In our first reading, Joshua is trying to sell the people on the idea of remaining faithful to the God of their ancestors. It's not an easy sale. The tribes of Israel are seriously tempted to transfer their allegiance to the gods of the Amorites. After all, the Amorites are rich and secure. The Israelites are impoverished and threatened. There appear to be clear advantages to the Amorite option. Joshua must act to stem the gradual drift of the people over to the Amorite brand of religion. He brings the situation to a head by demanding an immediate decision. "If it does not please you to serve the Lord, decide today whom you *will* serve..." Joshua wins the day by means of a powerful slogan -- a tag line worthy of Madison Avenue: "As for me and *my* household, we will serve the Lord." This testimonial stirs the people's feelings, and brings to their minds all that the Lord had done for them in the past. For the time being, at least, their loyalty is secured.

Jesus is less successful with the crowd in our Gospel. For some time his popularity has been building. People have been coming from miles around to hear him speak. He has kindled in them the hope that the Messiah has finally come. They want desperately to believe that here, at long last, is the one who will deliver them from their captivity, and fulfill their longings. Until now, his words have been a balm to their souls. Now, however, he has told them that unless they eat his flesh and drink his

blood they will not have life within them. As Jesus spoke, he must have felt his audience grow stiff. He must have seen their eyes grow dull. He had lost them. Their hopes, and their interest died. How could he give them his flesh and blood as food? Here, evidently, was yet another madman making fools of them. And the Gospel tells us, “As a result of this, many of his disciples returned to their former way of life and no longer accompanied him.”

If Jesus were just another huckster trying to make a sale, he would have back-peddled furiously at this point. He would have dropped the Bread of Life business, and gone back to telling the people what they wanted to hear. But Jesus was, and is, the genuine article, so back-peddling wasn't an option. He could only tell them the truth. When you purchase a car, you can either buy one off the lot, or else put together your own package of options, and have the factory build a car according to your specifications. Truth doesn't work that way. You can't customize the truth according to your tastes. That way lays delusion and disaster.

Like the crowd in our Gospel, we can either accept the truth, or deny it. We can close the deal or walk away. We're no longer scandalized by Jesus' words about the Bread of Life. But there may be other aspects of his teaching which do offend us, or which violate the conventional wisdom of the society in which we live. When this is so, we must resist the temptation to try to cut Jesus down to our size -- to try to tailor him to our tastes. We must, rather, say yes or no to what he offers us. And as he offers us hope and love, Spirit and life, God give us the grace to say yes.