

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost
August 23, 2009

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Have you ever wondered why each Sunday we read the particular Bible readings we do? Those of you who come to the Episcopal Church from a Free Church tradition may have been assuming since you became Episcopalians that your preacher gets to choose the lessons. No way – we are far from that. This is the Episcopal Church. Not only do we have a set liturgy, our corporate prayer is structured; it comes out of the aptly titled Book of Common Prayer. We also have a common set of Bible readings. Across the United States of America each Sunday all of us are reading the same lessons in the Episcopal Church. Have you heard of Year A, Year B, Year C? Each year on the first Sunday of Advent we begin a new liturgical year, it's the New Year's Day of the church, the First Sunday of Advent, and each year has its own cycle of readings. This year we're in cycle B so where do we find these readings? I bet you've always wondered that. In the "Book of Common Prayer". Check out in your books page 889. It is entitled "The Lectionary", which means "the readings". On the left-hand part of the page, 888, there are the rubrics, that is directions, information about the readings and then on 889 they begin and for some 190 pages, if you're hearing a really dull sermon, you can read through the Lectionary. It's a chart of the readings to be used at every service: which Hebrew scripture reading, which Psalm, which Epistle, the Letters, most written by Paul, some others by early church writers and then which Gospel we are reading. Now you Episcopalians keep claiming you don't know much about the Bible, but in the three-year lectionaries of Sunday readings and the two-year cycle of Morning and Evening Prayer we read nearly all of Holy Scripture, just about everything except some of the "begats", which were eliminated. So the readings for Sunday worship make up this three year cycle, year A, Year B and Year C. Then there's a two-year cycle: The Daily Office, Year One and Year Two, which lists the readings for Morning and Evening Prayer, "Daily Office" coming from the Latin "obicium", meaning "the doing of work", the work being "Prayer. We say Evening Prayer 5:30 Mondays through Fridays in our chapel, excepting Wednesdays when instead we offer the midweek Holy Eucharist and that's another way to catch up with more Bible – reading through the Morning and Evening Prayer Bible suggestions and those too are in the Lectionary chart at the back of this section. So you see where we find what readings we use. Now recently, I think about a year and a half ago, we began to use the Revised Common Lectionary, an offshoot of our Episcopal Lectionary. There are sometimes little differences between our readings and the Revised Common Lectionary. For example, I'll bet you're really going to be interested in this: today's Gospel reading from John began with verse 56 in what we read instead of verse 60 if you look on page 909 – those of you who still have your Prayer Book open, check out 909 and you'll see under on the left-hand column the Propers closest to the date and we're Proper 16 because we're closest to August 24, there are the readings on the right. In the Episcopal Lectionary the Gospel of John chapter 6, verses 60 through 69, but I'm sure you noticed that when Jack read our Gospel he started at verse 56, so why? Well, stay tuned I'll answer that question in a minute. I'm pointing out these discrepancies because I want you to know what it's like to be a Liturgical nerd. This is just the

sort of thing that Liturgy nerds, that's what Dean Lupfer calls himself and Strega and me and we're proud of it! It's we Liturgical nerds who like to understand why we do what we do and we'll explain to anybody who will listen, so you're all caught for another minute. So as I say a couple of years ago we began to use the Revised Common Lectionary here at Trinity under the leadership of Mary Sicilia. And there are two reasons why we are using now the Revised Common Lectionary. The first is we're in sync with all the other mainline churches, not just the Episcopal Churches, but Presbyterian, United Church of Christ, United Methodist and being in sync means when we clergy get together in ecumenical groups to talk about our upcoming sermons, we're talking about the same readings. I find it pretty inspiring to think that folks all over the country and all the mainline denominations and in fact often the Roman Catholic readings, we're all reading the same passages. To know that makes me feel closer to the family of God worshiping in hundreds upon hundreds of churches across our country and in fact our collect this morning prayed: "Grant, O merciful God that Your Church being gathered together in unity by your Holy Spirit", etc. It's a form of unity, all of us reading the same readings together. The other advantage of the Revised Common Lectionary is that the Hebrew Scriptures appear in chunks so that over a period of weeks we hear the entire story of Abraham and Sarah or Isaiah and Rebecca or Jacob, Leah and Rachael. Now our Episcopal Lectionary jumps all around. Keep page 909 open, you still got it? If you go down the right column looking only at the Old Testament reading, the Hebrew Scripture reading which is the first of each group, you'll see in just these several weeks we go from Exodus to Deuteronomy to Proverbs, to Joshua, back to Deuteronomy, but quite a different chapter, then Isaiah –another chapter— Wisdom and Numbers. That is a lot of jumping around! The reason for that is that the committee that put together our Lectionary chose the Hebrew Scripture reading in order to follow the same theme as the Gospel. Now we preachers like that a lot, because then we've got the same theme, but it means you're jumping and jumping and jumping and you don't have that wonderful consistency of reading through part of a book of the Bible. I think that's really powerful and really important. So we've looked at today's Gospel reading in the Lectionary we used to use which starts on verse 60 of the sixth chapter of John's Gospel when this morning we started with verse 56. Why? Well in the Book of Common Prayer choice verse 60 began "many of his disciples when they heard it said this is a hard saying, who can listen to it". "Many of his disciples when they heard" *what?* I guess we better be told to what this *hard saying* refers. Why the committee who designed this Episcopal Lectionary missed that they assigned a section which began by referring to what we hadn't just read remains a mystery. The Revised Common Lectionary Committee rectified some of those problems here and there. Their slight adjustments can make the readings more accessible and much less confusing. So after this rather unwieldy introduction, let's think about today's readings. In the reading from the Book of Joshua, the Judge Patriarch Joshua is nearing the end of his life, in fact in the next chapter he dies. And at this point he is gathering all the tribes of Israel and his last speech to them – it's actually it's a long and fervent sermon. And he's reminding them that they must be faithful to God. Revere God; put away the multiple gods your ancestors worshiped. Well, that's pretty simple to us -- of course revere one God, but in those times they were being counter-cultural by worshiping only one God, by being mono-theist. All the other cultures around them had many gods. And the people at Joshua's insistence pledged their faithfulness to God and in so doing –

as I say they're pretty counter-cultural. Joshua is reminding them to remain faithful to one God, our God, what we call the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. And the covenant the people of Israel make with God to worship God and God alone demanded great courage. Dean Lupfer preached last week that we're called to focus on challenge not on comfort. Joshua's contemporaries are accepting the challenge to go against the multiple god worship practiced in their day and accepting that challenge demanded courage. Courage regarding the call of seeking challenge rather than comfort. I read a poem called: "It is raining on the house of Anne Frank". It's by Linda Paston.

"It Is Raining on the House of Anne Frank"

It is raining on the house
of Anne Frank
and on the tourists
herded together under the shadow
of their umbrellas,
on the perfectly silent
tourists who would rather be
somewhere else
but who wait here on stairs
so steep they must rise
to some occasion
high in the empty loft,
in the quaint toilet,
in the skeleton
of a kitchen
or on the map-
each of its arrows
a barb of wire-
with all the dates, the expulsions,
the forbidding shapes
of its continents.
And across Amsterdam it is raining
on the Van Gogh Museum
where we will hurry next
to see how someone else
could find the pure
center of light
within the dark circle of his demons

Courage on the perfectly silent tourists who would rather be somewhere else. Even the tourists exhibit some element of courage by standing on those steep stairs to see a house dedicated to courage and terror. I'm sure some of you have been to the Anne Frank house. I

remember it vividly although it was forty years ago. You stand at the bottom of that very steep staircase, narrow steep staircase that goes up to the attic where they lived and a child who had the courage to write her diary before dying at the hands of the Nazis who condemned Anne and her family because she was Jewish – Jewish, just like Jesus and courage – Van Gogh because he painted with courage. He painted incredible light, brightness, color amidst that dark circle of his mental illness. Courage – Paul’s letter to the people of Ephesus that we heard from today is written from prison. He exhorts them to accept challenge rather than comfort. Finally, he writes, be strong in the Lord; stand therefore and fasten the belt of truth around your waist and put on the breast plate of righteousness. Imagine Paul in prison as I repeat the first part of “It’s raining on the house of Anne Frank” ‘and on the tourists herded together under the shadow of their umbrellas, on the perfectly silent tourists who would rather be somewhere else’, but they are not somewhere else. And then in John’s Gospel – courage – the hard saying we heard at the beginning of this reading “those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me and I in them. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate and they died, but the one who eats this bread will live forever”. No wonder many of those listening to Jesus found those statements difficult. We do too. We study them. We wrestle with them; we chew on them. Bad pun – chewing on the bread of life -- sorry. For Jesus’ listeners they must have seemed too mystical, too similar to pagan mystery religions of the time. Therefore many of Jesus’ listeners fell away. They disappeared; they didn’t stay at the bottom of that staircase. The challenge was just too much. “And across Amsterdam it is raining on the Van Gogh Museum where we hurry next to discover how someone else could discover the pure center of light within the dark circle of his demons”. Vincent and Anne suffered and brought light into our world. They rose to challenges; they weren’t blessed with much comfort, were they? Our courage to choose challenge over comfort is in the stories of the people of faith we read throughout the Bible. The courage to choose challenge is the mandate. The commandment “Jesus loves us” and leaves with us or indeed to love another is to accept a challenge. You’ll have noticed this summer we are using a different Eucharistic Prayer and when we pray it this morning notice after the Celebrant has invoked the Holy Spirit upon the bread and the wine and rehearsed that story of how Jesus commanded us to eat and drink in remembrance of him, notice the Celebrant then prays “deliver us from the presumption of coming to this table for solace only and not for strength” – “deliver us from the presumption of coming to this table for solace only and not for strength”. We ask God for the strength to accept life’s challenges over comfort, for the strength and courage to find the pure center of light within the dark circle of our demons. Anne Frank, Vincent Van Gogh -- challenged, living in little comfort. What courage! Until each could not go on until the life of each was snuffed out by two dreadful deaths. “It is raining on the House of Anne Frank and on the tourists herded together under the shadow of their umbrellas, on the perfectly silent tourists, who would rather be somewhere else, but who wait here on the stairs, so steep they must rise to some occasion, high in the empty loft, in the quaint toilet, in a skeleton of a kitchen, or on the map each of its arrows a barb of wire with all the dates, the expulsions, the forbidding shapes of continence and across Amsterdam it is raining on the Van Gogh Museum where we will hurry next to see how someone else could find the pure center of light within the dark circle of his demons.