

Sermon - Sunday, August 22, 2021 Pentecost 13

John 6:56-69

⁵⁶Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. ⁵⁷Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me.

⁵⁸This 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.” ⁵⁹He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum.

⁶⁰When many of his disciples heard it, they said, **“This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?”** ⁶¹But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, “Does this offend you? ⁶²Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? ⁶³It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. ⁶⁴But among you there are some who do not believe.” For Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe, and who was the one that would betray him.

⁶⁵And he said, “For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father.” ⁶⁶**Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him.** ⁶⁷So Jesus asked the twelve, “Do you also wish to go away?” ⁶⁸Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. ⁶⁹We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.”

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In this morning's Gospel, Jesus loses disciples because of his difficult teaching. What jumped out at me is **that**

'...many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him.' That was rough; losing followers and allies. This is a serious loss of support. Only a believing remnant remains" (Kostenberger, 218). None of us want to lose our friends and support.

I came across two stories that shed light on our Gospel. They are both stories about children's dolls.

The first is about a Toys for Tots program sponsored by the Canadian and American military. Toys for Tots collects and distributes millions of toys.^[8]

But a few years ago, Toys for Tots turned down a gift of 4,000 Jesus dolls. The dolls were new. They recited Jesus' sayings, like "Love your neighbour as yourself."

At the time, a spokesman for Toys for Tots explained that, as a government entity, the military **"can't take a chance on sending a Talking Jesus doll to a Jewish family or a Muslim family."** He also said,

"Kids, want a gift for the holiday season that is fun."

But later, perhaps in response to negative publicity, the decision was reversed. A Toys for Tots spokesperson said, **"We believe that with some effort we will be able to find homes for them all"** -- and they did.

The second story has to do with another Jesus doll -- a plush doll -- huggable and washable. It was a talking doll too. It said things like, "Your life matters so much to me." That's a nice thing to say, but Jesus didn't say it. It might have come from Mr. Rogers.

These two dolls illustrate two things about the Jesus we find in our Gospel lesson today.

- First, in our Gospel lesson, **people were offended by Jesus.** The Toys for Tots story illustrates that Jesus can still offend today, just as he did two thousand years ago.

- Second, the plush doll that said, "Your life matters to me" illustrates the kind of Jesus that many of us prefer -- a cuddly Jesus who affirms instead of offends. There **is** that side of Jesus.

Jesus did say “Come to me, all you who are weary...and I will give you rest.” But Jesus also challenged and stretched his followers. We see that in this morning’s Gospel. What he said made them uncomfortable and he knew it...but he didn’t back down...nor sugar coat what he had to say in order to ‘keep’ his followers

In our Gospel lesson, Jesus offended by saying:

"Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them" (v. 56).

We can't really blame the people who were listening to Jesus for being offended. We have inherited hundreds of years of the practice of Holy Communion, so when we hear these words we picture the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper.

But those people didn't have that advantage. When they heard Jesus talk about eating his flesh and drinking his blood, it sounded like cannibalism. Nothing could have been more repugnant to them. Eating human flesh and drinking human blood, was counter to Jewish religious teachings. They do not realize that Jesus is using his body and blood as a metaphor to suggest a very close union between himself and his disciples.

Christian scholars today still argue about what Jesus meant when he said:

"Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them" (v. 56).

So it is not surprising that ordinary people took what Jesus said the wrong way. The real surprise is that some of them didn't -- that some of them stayed with him -- that some of them continued as his disciples.

But many of Jesus' disciples turned back and no longer followed him (v. 66). These weren't just random crowds -- these were disciples. They took offense at what Jesus said **and left**. This happens to Jesus and it happens today. Every parish and every minister in the history of Christianity has faced times when offense is taken. Seminaries do not forewarn their students. Every Christian leader needs to know there will be tough times when people are offended and to recognize that one may never get used to it. It seems so far removed from our ideal of Christian community, and yet it is a reality. In any ministry, any community, there will always be times of encouragement and times of discouragement. In discouraging times, ministry leaders often do two things. First, they gather as much support as possible and second, they determine who is truly committed.

Jesus Christ clearly did not read the latest books on ministry leadership. As chapter 6 of John's Gospel closes, he accepts followers drifting away. Jesus does not run after them and take back what he had said to keep them. There is no mention of a new ministry outreach campaign. At the beginning of John 6, Jesus provides food for a crowd of 5000 from a little boy's lunch. Now, as the chapter closes, Jesus has only twelve followers, one of whom is Judas, the traitor. This is hardly an example for today's church-growth experts, some of whom would likely recommend strategies to regain support. Jesus, instead, gives the remaining disciples an opportunity to walk away:

“Do you also wish to go away?” Jesus asked the Twelve (v. 67). But wait, this is more than an invitation to walk away. It is a call to commitment.

We know the 12 stayed. In reply to Jesus' question they say

‘To whom can we go?’ For them there is no one else. They knew he was the best rabbi, unlike any other they had walked with before. Maybe they didn't understand everything, especially about eating his body and drinking his blood. Not understanding everything didn't stop them from continuing to walk with Jesus whom they acknowledged as the Holy One of God. There they were...the remnant...the small fragment remaining...but they stayed.

Jesus question applies to us today, for in a way we too are the 'faithful remnant'. What is our answer?

“What is God calling the Church to become? Karl Barth a Swiss Reformed theologian whom many scholars regard as one of the most important thinkers of the 20th century writes, **“The real church is the lowliest, the poorest, the meanest, weakest thing that can possibly exist under God's heaven, gathered as it is around a manger and a cross.”**

What a wonderful reminder of the security and strength that reside in vulnerability and powerlessness.

David Heywood, Director of Pastoral Studies at Ripon College, near Oxford, England writes, “Not only did Jesus deliberately avoid opportunities for status and power, he aligned and identified himself with the poor and those on the margins of society ... In an age when the church is losing the trappings of status and power, the opportunity arises to discover the influence of love exercised from a place of weakness.” Thank God for this reminder in this time of uncertainty.

Many years ago, a missionary society wrote to David Livingstone, a Scottish Presbyterian pioneer medical missionary in Central Africa, and asked, "Have you found a good road to where you are? If so, we want to send other men to join you." Livingstone wrote back, "If you have men who will come only because there is a good road, I don't want them. I want men who will come if there is no road at all."

During the coming week, something for us to think about is what is our answer to Jesus question **"Do you also wish to go away?"** What does it mean to stay as the faithful remnant willing to eat our Lord's flesh and to drink his blood, so we can abide in him, and he in us? Amen.

Today we often are reluctant to present the demands of Christ to would-be disciples because we fear putting them off Christianity and driving them away. That is not the way of Jesus in this passage. His words are difficult for many people in this crowd to understand and harder still to follow.

We live in a make-up-your-mind generation. While there is evidence of church growth in many areas of the world -- such as parts of Asia and Latin America -- the fact is that the mainline churches across North America are being forced to recognize a decline in membership and mission outreach, so much so that many sociologists are calling us a post-Christian generation. Many people are walking away. Why is that? These verses help us to see some reasons.

The Truth Is Sometimes Hard To Handle

Despite the fact that Jesus performs a miracle with a boy's meal, it is not long before suspicion, doubt, and open hostility set in against him. The majority of the people are not ready to commit to his unique claims and uncompromising truths about the way of salvation (v. 29), about his ultimate identity (v. 32), about his superiority to Moses (vv. 35, 49-58), or about salvation coming from God alone (vv. 35-65). Witnessing a miracle or two is one thing. Unreserved commitment to the miracle worker can be

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Then Jesus asked the twelve -- the apostles -- the core group of his disciples:

"Do you also wish to go away?"

I wonder what Jesus was feeling when he said that. I wonder if he thought that they might leave too.

"Do you also wish to go away?"

I wonder what the disciples were feeling when they heard Jesus say that. There were twelve of them, so they must have had different reactions to what Jesus said. In fact, those twelve disciples probably had a dozen different reactions to what Jesus said.

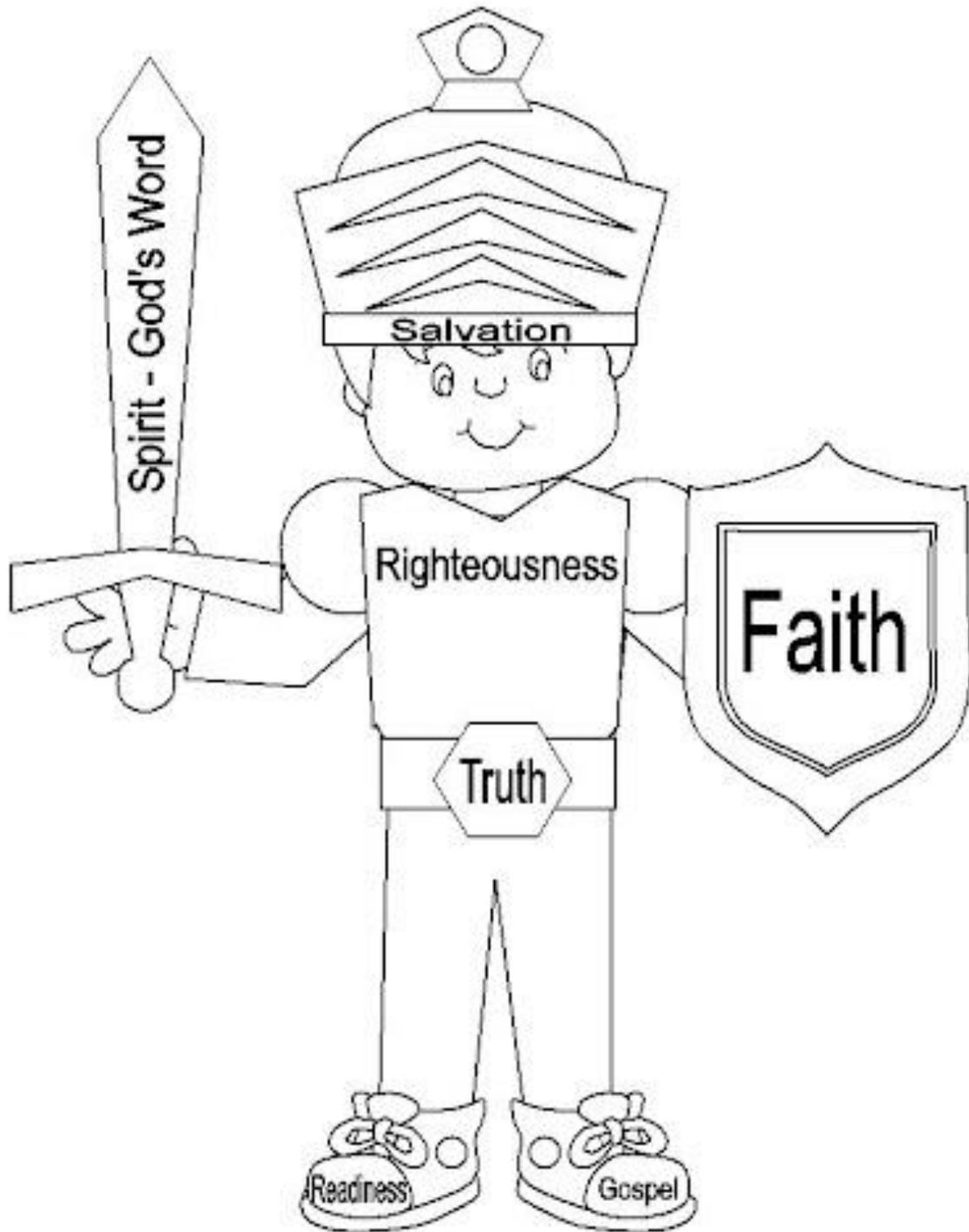
But the only reaction that we know for sure came from Peter. Peter had a quick mouth. He always had something to say, and he always said it. There was no stop sign between Peter's brain and his mouth -- nothing that said, "Go slowly. Take it easy!" If Peter thought it, he said it. He let the chips fall where they fell.

And sometimes he got it right. On this occasion, he got it exactly right. He said:

"Lord, to whom can we go?
You have the words of eternal life.
We have come to believe and know
that you are the Holy One of God" (vv. 68-69).

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Put on the whole armor of God!



"Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about (periepatoun -- were walking) with him" (v. 66). The phrase, "were walking," implies following -- discipleship.

The disciples who turned back clearly expected something other than what Jesus offers. They expected a messiah in the image of David -- a great leader to re-establish their glory days. Following the feeding of the five thousand, they tried to make Jesus king, but he refused their overture (v. 15). "What they wanted, (Jesus) would not give; what he offered, they would not receive" (Bruce, 164).

This "large-scale defection marks a watershed.... Chapter 6 ends on a note of failure. As a result, the scope of Jesus' followers is narrowed, so that only a believing remnant remains" (Kostenberger, 218).

"So Jesus asked the twelve" (v. 67a). We don't know how many disciples turned back, but "the twelve" remain. This is one of only four references to "the twelve" in this Gospel (see also 6:70-71; 20:24). This Gospel usually speaks of "the disciples" rather than "the twelve," but speaks of "the twelve" here to distinguish this smaller core group with the larger group of disciples, some of whom were offended by Jesus' teachings and turned away from him.

"Do you also wish to go away?" (v. 67b). The question as formulated in the Greek expects a negative response -- expects the twelve to respond that they do not wish to go away.

Many years ago, a missionary society wrote to David Livingstone, a Scottish Presbyterian pioneer medical missionary in Central Africa, and asked, "Have you found a good road to where you are? If so, we want to send other men to join you." Livingstone wrote back, "If you have men who will come only because there is a good road, I don't want them. I want men who will come if there is no road at all."

Every ministry and every ministry leader in the history of the Christian faith has faced tough times. Usually seminaries do not tell their students that, but if you are a Christian leader you need to know it and recognize that you may never get used to it. It seems so far removed from the picture of faith living that we expect, and yet it is reality. In any ministry endeavor there will always be times of encouragement and times of discouragement. In discouraging times, ministry leaders often feel compelled to do two things. The first is to shore up as much support as possible and the second is to try to determine who is truly committed to the continued advancement of the ministry.

Jesus Christ clearly did not read some of the latest books on ministry leadership. As chapter 6 of John closes, he seems determined to drive away as many followers as possible from his ministry. There is no mention here of a new ministry growth campaign. Contrast this passage with the opening of John 6. Then, the crowd is so large that Jesus asks where he can find enough food to feed everyone. His disciples cannot imagine where they would find the money to feed so many. Jesus then feeds the multitude with a boy's lunch. He makes food packed for one young boy into more than enough to feed a hungry mass. There are twelve baskets left over. Now, as the chapter closes, Jesus has not a multitude but twelve followers, one of whom is Judas, the traitor, lying in wait for an opportunity to betray (see v. 70). This is hardly a textbook example for today's church-growth experts, some of whom would likely recommend damage control and intensive strategies to shore up support. Jesus, however, gives the remaining disciples an opportunity to walk away: " 'You do not want to leave too, do you?' Jesus asked the Twelve" (v. 67). But wait, this is more than an invitation to walk away. It is a call to commitment.

Tough Talk

Today we often are reluctant to present the demands of Christ to would-be disciples because we fear putting them off

Christianity and driving them away. That is not the way of Jesus in this passage. His words are difficult for many people in this crowd to understand and harder still to follow. He says, "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him" (v. 56). Then he seems almost critical of their proud heritage: "Your forefathers ate manna and died, but he who feeds on this bread will live forever." The Jewish religious leaders have taught them that cannibalism -- eating human flesh and drinking human blood, runs counter to their religious teachings, and remind them time and again that theirs is a heritage that had experienced God's provision. They fail to see past the words and realize that Jesus is using a metaphor that speaks to the real union that must take place if they would be his disciples.

"This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?" (v. 60). Jesus knows that many people in the crowd are there for what he can give them. He makes claims for himself that will force them to decide whom they will follow. Would it be the teachings and traditions of their old religious teachers or Christ's message that offends more than a few? The moment of decision has come and when his talk gets tough, the people drift away.

Christ's call to commitment is a double-edged demand. First, it sets forth clearly his life mission and his expectation for those who would go further with him. Second, it weeds out shallowness of commitment from among them. As a result, thousands drop out. Now, Jesus turns to the twelve and asks his pointed question: "You do not want to leave too, do you?" It is a make-up-your-mind moment of a lifetime!

We live in a make-up-your-mind generation. While there is evidence of church growth in many areas of the world -- such as parts of Asia and Latin America -- the fact is that the mainline churches across North America are being forced to recognize a decline in membership and mission outreach, so much so that many sociologists are calling us a post-Christian generation. Many people are walking away. Why is that? These verses help us to see some reasons.

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Despite the fact that Jesus performs a miracle with a boy's meal, it is not long before suspicion, doubt, and open hostility set in against him. The majority of the people are not ready to commit to his unique claims and uncompromising truths about the way of salvation (v. 29), about his ultimate identity (v. 32), about his superiority to Moses (vv. 35, 49-58), or about salvation coming from God alone (vv. 35-65). Witnessing a miracle or two is one thing. Unreserved commitment to the miracle worker can be another. When truth comes to us, we finally have but two ways to respond to it: We can receive it or reject it. The people in this crowd reject Christ's truth for many reasons.

Some oppose it because they oppose him. He is new. He is different and people often do not like change. Many Jewish leaders disagree with Jesus' teaching from the beginning. For one thing, he is not a local fellow. He is from Nazareth and they have a saying, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (see John 1:46).

The Jews began to grumble about him because he said, "I am the bread that came down from heaven." They said, "Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, 'I came down from heaven'?"
-- John 6:41-42

Rejected by his own people!

He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.

-- John 1:10-11

Later, the same people argue, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" (John 6:52). They reject both him and his teaching.

They are like those people outside and inside today's church who want to rewrite the gospel. Dan Brown's *The DaVinci Code* is a typical example of this. From the outset, Brown claimed that his book had merit in its historical accuracy. In fact, it is nothing more than a speculative novel in the style of so many before it, written by one who rejects the claims of Christ and of the ancient scriptures. Moreover, it is not original in its attacks on the gospel. Rather, it is one of the latest volumes in a long list of heretical writings.

There are others among the crowd who seem blind to truth no matter how obvious it is. They see and benefit from Christ's miracle with the loaves and fishes, and they marvel as to how Jesus crosses the lake (see John 6:5-13, 22-25). Yet, how soon they forgot! Call it memory myopia, if you like, for that is what it is. How can it be? Jesus says, "No one can come to me unless the Father has enabled him" (v. 65). Indeed, how can it be? They are shallow from the beginning. Later, Saint Paul would write, "The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God" (2 Corinthians 4:4).