

John 6:56-69

Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. 57 Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. 58 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.” 59 He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum.

60 When many of his disciples heard it, they said, “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?” 61 But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, “Does this offend you? 62 Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? 63 It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. 64 But 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. 65 And 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. 67 So Jesus asked the twelve, “Do you also wish to go away?” 68 Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. 69 We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.”

UNBELIEF TODAY

The NY Times ran a story this week about a Pentecostal minister in Louisiana who became an atheist. It happened this way. In the middle of the night he got a call. A parishioner’s brother had been killed in a motorcycle accident.

The minister tried to comfort her, but the words didn’t come easily. In fact after talking with this lady he took a long hard look in the bathroom mirror and decided he didn’t want to follow Jesus any more. In fact he realized that he didn’t even believe in God any more.

He is now estranged from family and friends and travels the country telling his story at atheist conventions. And he’s not alone. This former pastor is

part of growing group of people who have left the Christian faith and indeed have abandoned belief in God altogether. When people are asked about religion in polls these days 20% or more check “none of the above”.

I am saddened by the fact that many people have decided not to follow Jesus. All of us have friends and family members who grew up in the church but now for whatever reason just don't believe any more. What can we say about those who start to follow Jesus and then decide to go in a different direction?

UNBELIEF THEN

I think it's important for us to remember that from the very beginning disciples have turned away from Jesus. In our lesson for today many disciples quit following Jesus because they just don't believe in him any more. The message Jesus preaches is just too hard to accept.

In fact, so many disciples leave that only the 12 are left. (And we know that one of the 12 will betray Jesus.) So, Jesus turns to the 12, perhaps with a tear in his eye and asks, “What about you? Are you going to leave me too?”

Why did so many disciples leave Jesus? What was it about his message that suddenly made him so unpopular?

BREAD THEY DIDN'T WANT

Chapter 6 of John's gospel begins with great promise. Jesus feeds 5,000 people with only 5 loaves and 2 fish. The crowd goes wild. In fact the crowd loves Jesus so much that they want to make him king, by force if necessary.

Jesus disappoints them. He gives them the slip by sailing to the other side of the sea. But, the crowd's desire for a king and savior will not be denied. They get in their boats and follow him to other side. And they ask Jesus to give them what they want.

What do they want? Well, they want breakfast as well as supper! They say Moses gave his people manna in the wilderness. “Jesus, if you're the leader we think you are, you'll give us something to eat too.”

But, Jesus disappoints them again. He says, “What you really need is not another meal. What you really need is bread from heaven. I am that bread.” The crowd was not impressed with his answer. They wanted food, and they wanted it now.

The hungers of the moment often cloud our judgment too. We forget that we have needs that cannot be filled by yet another trip to the Publix or the local restaurant. In fact our nation’s struggle with eating too much might be a symptom of a deeper spiritual problem. One theologian defined gluttony as raiding the icebox as a cure for spiritual malnutrition.

That’s what Jesus was saying to the crowd. Jesus said you don’t need another meal. You need me. I am the bread that came down from heaven.

And the crowd begins to turn on him because he was not the Messiah they wanted. They say, “How can he make a claim like that. We know you Jesus. We knew your daddy Joseph. How can you say, ‘I came down from heaven?’”

Obviously they didn’t believe that heaven could come in such an earthly form.

But, Jesus does not make things any easier for the crowd. Instead, he doubles down on this difficult imagery. He says, “I am the living bread that came down heaven. If a person eats of this bread, he will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.”

SYMBOLIC WORDS OF POWER

And then he uses those gruesome words that begin our lesson for today. He says, “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.” (John 6:56)

Those of us who have been in the church a long time and live on the other side of the cross and the resurrection can understand that these words are symbolic. After all every time we take the Lord’s Supper I say the words of institution given to us by Jesus, “This is my body that is broken for you. This is my blood that was shed for you.”

The words are very familiar to us, so familiar in fact that they have lost their power. How can we so casually talk about body broken and blood shed? A minister told of reading the words of institution during communion and a little girl in the congregation said, “Yuk.”

The congregation was deeply disturbed by the little girl’s offhand comments. It somehow seemed sacrilegious to think of the sacrament in such graphic and literal terms.

But, on the other hand, it is equally wrong to think of the sacrament as “just a metaphor.” The sacrament is a powerful and disturbing symbol of the sacrifice that was made on our behalf on the cross. We must take the sacrament with understanding or we risk trivializing the gospel and missing the spiritual point of it all.

This was a problem in the early church. The Apostle Paul talked about those who ate and drank the Lord’s Supper unworthily. And he suggested that they needed to stop and examine their lives before they took the sacrament. There was more to this meal than bread and wine. It was about following Jesus. And his body was broken. His blood was shed.
(See 1 Corinthians 11:27-29)

THE COST OF DISCIPLESHIP

Can we dare to drink that cup? Can we dare to eat that bread? The sacrament of the Lord’s Supper is about the sacrifice that Jesus made for us on the cross. In Jesus Christ we are forgiven. In that sense the bread of heaven and the cup of sacrifice nourish us.

But, on the other hand the broken body and blood shed remind us of something else. Jesus calls his disciples to take up a cross and follow him. There is a cost to following Jesus, and that cost takes the form of a cross.

I wonder if this is why those would be disciples left Jesus. It was not the language Jesus used. They understood better than us the symbolic use of sacrifice. They understood better than us the idea that the Messiah would be a suffering servant. This was an important part of their scriptural heritage.

It was just the idea that they had to participate in such suffering that gave them such difficulty. Eating the body of Jesus and drinking his blood meant

participating in the sacrifice. There is no free breakfast for the disciples of Jesus. There is indeed a cost to discipleship.

This is John's way of saying what the gospel of Mark says more directly. Jesus told his disciples in that gospel, "Take up your cross and follow me."

I think the text supports that interpretation. Notice that the disciples who left Jesus didn't say, "This is a hard saying. Who can understand it?" No, they said, "This is a hard saying. Who can accept it?"

These former disciples understood and took offense at the cost of discipleship. They were unwilling to go where Jesus was leading them. They were unwilling to accept it. So, they turned backs on Jesus and left.

REDEFINING JESUS

A university chaplain told of receiving a familiar criticism of the Christian faith after the Easter service. The student said,

"I know what you Christians are up to. We studied all about this in philosophy class. This is called projection. You desire to live forever, and therefore you have projected your infantile wish onto the universe and named that God."

The quick thinking chaplain replied,

"This shows how little you know. If we were going to project a God, we would certainly not have projected this one! We've demonstrated time and time again through the centuries, that we are capable of producing many more accessible and likable gods than this one!"

The chaplain had a point. Jesus as presented in the Bible is certainly not an image of God that we would come up with on our own. If we had it our way there would have been no blood shed or body broken, not in Jesus' life or in our own. We would like to define salvation as an escape from all those things.

Indeed, many Christians have tried to do that. They have reworked and redefined Christ to make him into a more palatable Messiah. Instead of Jesus being the One who asks us to eat the sacrament of suffering, Jesus

becomes the one who gives us what we want. He builds a hedge around our life so that nothing bad happens to us. He helps us be successful and make lots of money.

Great crowds will still follow that Jesus. If you feed them what they want, they will come. But, how does such a message stand up in the middle of the night when you get that dreaded call? If we believe that God is out to save us from the difficulties of life there will come a time when that God will let us down.

EVANGELICAL ATHIESM

You may have noticed an article in yesterday's paper about a professor at UCF who is challenging the Christian faith of some of his students. It's an old story actually. Many of us have met someone like him in college. He or she is a person who used to believe but then they saw the light of reason. They began to ask questions to which their faith had no answers.

And so these former disciples turn their back on Jesus and go in a different direction. Now I can understand that. I would suggest that perhaps their view of Jesus is skewed in some way, but faith cannot be coerced. It must be real. I appreciate someone who is an honest doubter. In fact sometimes, honest doubt is the first step toward true faith.

But, why do some of these former believers insist on spreading the "gospel" of unbelief to their students?

Oh, they'll say that they are just trying to get the students to think for themselves. And it's true that some young Christians have just believed what they have been told and have not learned to make faith their own. At some point in our life we have to go beyond the faith of our fathers and mothers and decide for ourselves to follow Jesus.

But, why do these evangelists of unbelief make it their mission to challenge the faith of others?

That former minister from Louisiana now uses his preaching skills to deliver the atheist message in a winsome way to crowds of unbelievers all over the country. He doesn't get much money for it. In fact his stance has cost him dearly. Why does he do it?

Why does the professor at UCF challenge his Christian students? Is it really because he wants these students to think for themselves or is it because he is trying to fill a void in his own life?

TO WHOM CAN WE GO?

If we quit believing in Jesus or if we quit believing in God all together, we still have to answer the question that the Apostle Peter asked in our lesson for today. You'll remember that Jesus looked at the 12 disciples and asked, "Do you also wish to go away?"

And to that question Peter asked another question, "To whom can we go?"

That's the sixty-four dollar question that the atheist or the agnostic has to answer. To whom can we go? If you have decided not to believe in God or if you can't believe in God, then to whom can you go? How will you organize your life? On what will you base your ethical stances?

Many atheists/agnostics believe in humanity. The ultimate goal in life becomes to emulate and follow the best and brightest that have come before us.

Now, to be fair there is something good about this. Quite often Christians and other religions have been too closed minded and repressive in their approach to scientific discoveries or new teachings.

Christians should never ban viewpoints or ideas that they find challenging. The Bible teaches us that God created this world good, and when honest seekers discover things about the world that we find difficult, then we should be open to understanding the world in a new way.

Faith and reason should not be enemies. They should be partners in discovery.

But, a change in our understanding or technology will not necessarily give us the ultimate answers that we seek. Yes, technology is great, but it can also be used to develop weapons of mass destruction. Modern science can

prolong our life, but there comes a time when we wonder if it's worth the cost from both a financial and a psychological/spiritual standpoint.

But, the greatest weakness of this position comes when all is said and done. When that great turning point comes in our life, when we are forced to ask what it is all about, then how well does the humanistic philosophy stand up?

When the call comes in the middle of the night, I will not turn to my psychology books or my philosophy books. I will turn to Jesus. I will turn to my belief that in life and in death I belong to God.

Peter asked, "To whom can we go?" And then the Apostle answered his own question. He said, "You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."

A WITNESS TO THE RESURRECTION

In the Presbyterian funeral service (Technically, we call that service a witness to the resurrection, a much better description.), we use these same words right before we read the promises of Scripture. "Lord, to whom can we go?" And then like Peter we answer our own question when we say, "You have the words of eternal life."

Jesus is indeed the Holy One of God. In other words Jesus is the intersection between the Divine and the human. In Jesus we see what it means to be truly human. We see a man who challenged the religious authorities and the authoritarian ways that made the people suffer. And in Jesus we see that when those authoritarian religious and political powers did their worst, God did His best.

So, in Jesus we also see Divine revelation and Divine salvation. In Jesus we see that God is with us in our suffering and that suffering will not have the final word. The resurrection speaks of a hope that is above and beyond our ability to understand. This kind of faith is not a human achievement but a precious gift from God. (John 6:65)

For this reason we should not speak harshly of those who turn their backs on Jesus and even deny the existence of God. The cross of Christ is a stumbling block and foolishness to many in this world. It always has been.

But, for us that same cross is the sign of salvation. (See 1 Corinthians 1:22-31)

And so we do not criticize those who leave or boast of our own faith.

Instead, we simply ask, “Lord to whom can we go?” And by the grace of God we know the answer, “You have the words of eternal life.”

Let us humbly follow and trust the one who gave body and blood for us. Let us trust him to give us what we need this day, and let us trust him to give us what we need for all eternity.

Amen.