

## Choose This Day...

John 6:56-69

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After five weeks of bread, I'm afraid my material may be getting a bit stale... Jesus said, "I am the bread of heaven." We find that statement sandwiched right in the middle of the sixth chapter of the Gospel of John. You see, Jesus had a way of saying things that sliced right to the heart of the matter. And it probably helped that he had a wry sense of humor about him.

But the problem was that when Jesus spoke those words to the crowd, he wasn't exactly the toast of the town. No, he was in a real jam. In fact, there was a woman in the crowd, with her hair in a bun, who thought that what Jesus had to say was rather half-baked. It turns out that some of the people thought they had bit off more than they could chew, because what Jesus said was hard to swallow. Well, we better quit loafing around with all these puns, and get down to the bread and butter issues at hand. Because you certainly didn't come here this morning for a bunch of crummy jokes. But hopefully you'll just roll with the punches. Because I'm just trying to get a rise out of you.

Seriously, today we come to the end of a long series of readings from the sixth chapter of John's gospel. The chapter began with great excitement and enthusiasm when Jesus miraculously fed 5,000 people with just five loaves and two fish. The people were beside themselves, and they hounded Jesus, following him to the other side of the lake, hoping that Jesus would feed them once again.

But from that point forward, disillusionment with Jesus gradually began to creep in. Jesus dampened their enthusiasm when he told the people not to be so concerned about pursuing things that perish, like bread. Instead, he said, they need to be more interested in pursuing that which leads to eternal life. Jesus wasn't saying that their physical needs weren't important. He was saying that there are greater gifts that he had to offer them. At that point, you could almost hear someone from the crowd ask, "So, you're saying you're not going to give us more bread?"

The disillusionment with Jesus was only beginning. Because the next thing we know, Jesus told the people some very confusing things. He claimed that he was the true bread from heaven, and that for people to receive the life that he offered, they would have to believe in him. To make things more confusing, Jesus then said to them, "You must eat my flesh and drink my blood", which was his way of saying that believing is more than an intellectual exercise. Jesus was saying, "Believing is a matter of taking my essence into your being, so that who I am informs who you become."

If we are interested in Jesus, it turns out that our interest has to be more than whether or not Jesus can fill our stomachs. If we are interested in Jesus, our interest must include a total engagement with his very being, so that who we are becomes inextricably tied to who Jesus is. Jesus doesn't simply want to occupy our minds or our stomachs; he wants to flow through our veins, he wants to be our lifeblood.

And so the end result of all this back and forth between Jesus and the people who had gathered around him is the response that we see in the 60<sup>th</sup> verse of this sixth chapter of John: "When many of his disciples heard it, they said, 'This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?'"<sup>1</sup>

To which Jesus essentially responded, "You're right—it is a difficult teaching, and not everybody can accept it." Not exactly the most pastoral, comforting response one would expect from Jesus. But it is true, and there is no use in hiding the fact that faith, the kind of faith to which Jesus calls us, is a total commitment of

<sup>1</sup>John 6:60

ourselves to him. Faith, in the way Jesus expects it of all who follow him, is something that not everyone is willing to give.

Because faith is not something that everyone is willing to commit to, there will always be some who reject Jesus. We find this to be true in this morning's text, when John said, "Because of this, many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with [Jesus]."<sup>2</sup>

Many turned away from Jesus. What do you think it is that makes people want to turn away from Jesus? Why would people who begin to follow Jesus with wholehearted enthusiasm suddenly decide to walk away? Looking back on the earlier dialogues in this chapter, I found at least three things that cause people to turn away from Jesus.

The first reason that some will walk away from Jesus is because Jesus doesn't give them what they want. We see this when at first some were disappointed that Jesus wasn't going to give them more bread, like they had hoped for. And sometimes that is the case today, as well. Sometimes people want Jesus to fix their problems, or to give them health and wealth. And when the problems don't magically disappear, or when they don't get the health and wealth they were expecting, they decide that Jesus isn't what they want. So they walk away, looking for other quick solutions to their problems, or other instant riches schemes. Sometimes people walk away from Jesus because he doesn't give them what they want.

The second reason that people may walk away from Jesus is related to the first. Sometimes people will turn away from Jesus because they realize that Jesus' priorities are different from their own priorities. Again, the crowds of people were seeking loaves of bread, but Jesus pointed out that they ought to be seeking something of greater value, something eternal. Sometimes people simply want Jesus to validate the direction they're already heading, when what Jesus will require is a change in their priorities. When they discover that what Jesus wants them to be and do in their lives is a far cry from their own hopes and dreams, then they may walk away from Jesus.

Still another reason that some will walk away from Jesus is because he demands too much from us. The truth is, Jesus expects a radical commitment from us. Jesus doesn't just want us part-time; he wants us full-time. Jesus doesn't want to share us with anything or anyone else that would demand our loyalty; Jesus wants 100% of us.

This is, I think, one of those areas where the Christian church has compromised. In a culture where comfort is at a premium, and where "personal sacrifice" or "commitment" are terms that don't exist in many people's vocabulary, the church has accommodated. Instead of calling for a commitment on the level of marriage, we have watered down expectations of one another in the body of Christ. We don't hold one another accountable for allowing other priorities to jump ahead of our commitment to Jesus. We say it's okay, that you really don't need to do anything except show up to church on a fairly regular basis and stay caught up in your giving. In a day and age when there is much pressure placed on increasing church membership, it is very tempting to tell prospective members that joining the church is no big deal—anything to get more people to sign up.

A missionary in Brazil visited a town market on a religious holiday, and saw a sign in a store window advertising "Cheap crosses for sale." She was offended that anyone would try to cheapen the cross of Christ.

The truth is, many people today look for cheap crosses; they want a church that requires no sacrifice, no commitment, no cost, no pain. But that's not the way of Christ. To eat of the Bread of Life takes us down the way of the cross. There's no other way. Some people will walk away from Jesus because he demands too much from us.

After some of the disciples walked away from Jesus—and in John a disciple is not necessarily just the twelve that we know of, but anyone who seeks to follow Jesus—after some disciples walked away, Jesus turned to the twelve and asked them, "Do you also wish to go away?"<sup>3</sup> With that question, Jesus echoes the decision laid out by Joshua hundreds of years before: Choose this day whom you will serve. It was a moment of decision for the twelve disciples who had been following Jesus, learning from him and discovering the truths of the kingdom of God.

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<sup>2</sup>John 6:66

<sup>3</sup>John 6:67

You see, there comes a time when each of us has to make a conscious decision. Following Jesus is about choosing whom we will serve. We can choose the comfort and accommodation of the world, or we can choose a total commitment to Jesus and his ways. Choosing Jesus means we will choose love over hatred and vengeance, peace over warfare and strife, compassion over greed and selfishness, service of others over being served by others. Choosing Jesus means being willing to change the way we live, to make God and others the objects of our focus, and not ourselves. Choosing Jesus means choosing to live by the “difficult teaching that is hard to accept”.

In a world that says you have to look out for #1, in a world that says you have to take care of yourself first, in a world that tells you to do whatever feels good, Jesus calls us instead to deny ourselves, to take up our cross, and to follow him. Choose this day—will you also walk away, or will you follow Jesus?

In the face of the question put before him, Peter replies on behalf of the 12, “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.”<sup>4</sup> Peter has made the choice of faith. Peter has chosen whom he will serve. Peter has decided that in the end, he'd rather be uncomfortable in Jesus' presence, than comfortable without Jesus. Peter has decided that he'd rather take the more difficult and demanding road, if it means that Jesus will be on that road with him. Peter has decided that the pursuit of worldly success and personal comfort now is not as important as pursuing a relationship with God and eternal life through Jesus.

Ultimately, the choice of faith is the choice of whether or not you entrust your life, your destiny, your standing before God, into Jesus' hands. We may not fully understand everything Jesus demands of us. We may find ourselves disappointed with some of the things that happen in our lives. There will be sacrifices we will be called to make. But ultimately, what matters most is whether or not we trust Jesus enough to believe that his way is the only true way.

Peter and the disciples didn't comprehend the fullness of what Jesus was saying. But they did know Jesus. And they knew him to be the Holy One of God. And that was enough.

Knowing Jesus is enough. If you truly know Jesus, then the choice ought to be simple.

We may find doubts and fears creeping into our lives. But we know Jesus, and so we don't despair. We may wonder what we've gotten ourselves into. But we know Jesus, and so we have hope. We know Jesus, and we know his teachings, and we've seen him in action. And we've experienced his love.

Isn't that enough?

Who else can we go to? If not Jesus, who else?

Who else, but Jesus, can lead us into eternal life with God?

Choose this day whom you will serve.

But if you know Jesus, what choice is there, really?

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<sup>4</sup>John 6:68-69