

Epworth Chapel on the Green
August 26, 2012
Pentecost 13
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Joshua 24:1-25
Psalm 16
Ephesians 5:21-33
John 6:60-69

For the past several weeks, our Gospel lessons have focused on the “bread of life” discourse from John’s Gospel (chapter 6). Repeatedly, Jesus has been saying to his hearers (and to us): “I am the bread of life. I am the One sent by the Father to give you eternal life. Nothing else satisfies. Eat and drink of me, and you will live.”

Last week Jesus said, “unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood, you cannot have eternal life in you.”

Today’s lesson picks up that conversation, as the disciples scratch their heads and ask incredulously: “this is very hard to understand. How can anyone accept it?”

Indeed, the context of John’s Gospel shows that many did not accept Jesus’ words. John tells us that the wider audience of the Jews rejected Jesus’ message, and even some of his own disciples cannot accept it.

What is it about Jesus’ message here that causes persons to react so strongly, so negatively?

I believe our first clue comes in verse 63: “it is the Spirit who gives eternal life. Human effort accomplishes nothing. And the very words I have spoken to you are spirit and life. But some of you don’t believe me.”

Then, after a parenthetical remark by John, Jesus continues: “this is what I meant when I said that people can’t come to me unless the Father brings them to me” (v. 65)

And at this point many turn and walk away.

I believe, ironically, that the source of their stumbling is Jesus’ radical word of *grace* to them.

By that I mean this. Throughout this discourse, and throughout the Gospel, Jesus calls us and invites us to take up our cross and follow him despite the world’s sneers and misgivings.

But then, in the face of that call, it is made clear to us that in our human strength we do not have what it takes to respond to that call, and that without the grace of the Father drawing us we cannot do it.

Jesus reminds us that, left to ourselves, we human beings prefer our sin and will remain in it. Apart from the working of God’s grace quickening our spirits and planting seeds of grace in our hearts, we cannot in our own strength or effort turn to God and embrace him.

Put bluntly, we can only choose to follow Christ because God has first chosen us, and poured out his grace in our lives and drawn us by his Spirit to be his children.

We get a hint of this truth in our Old Testament lesson from Joshua, beginning in verse 13:

*I gave you land you had not worked for, and I gave you cities you did not build -- the cities in which you are now living. I gave you vineyards and olive groves for food, though you did not plant them.
[Joshua 24:13]*

It is upon this radical word of grace that people stumble and walk away. We stumble because Jesus' word here in the Gospel is a word of grace that shatters our illusions that we are self-determined, that we "choose" Christ apart from God's prior choice of us.

It is hard for many moderns to accept this truth from Jesus, because we want to safeguard the illusion that *we* are in control, that *we* decide and determine our destiny apart from the gracious working of God. In other words, we want salvation on *our* terms. *We* want to define the parameters of our relationship with God.

This is what has been happening in John chapter 6. The disciples and the Jewish crowds have demanded of Jesus that he be like Moses and do what Moses did. They have called for signs of proof from Jesus, so that they might decide whether or not they will believe in him.

But Jesus tells them that it doesn't work that way. Salvation comes to us on *God's* terms, not ours.

In a sense, our Old Testament lesson from Joshua and the Gospel lesson both present us today with a similar challenge and question. The question: *To whom will we yield our lives? Will we follow and depend upon ourselves, upon our own wisdom? Or will we put our trust in God and serve him? Will we try to dictate the terms of our relationship with God? Or will we accept the gift from heaven, the true bread that satisfies the deepest hunger of our souls?*

Jesus looks at the twelve disciples here and asks, “do you also want to go away?”

I very much like Peter's response to Jesus, primarily because I identify with it so much. Peter says, “Lord, to whom would we go? You alone have the words of eternal life?”

On the surface, this seems an innocent response, perhaps even an affirmation. But this is not exactly a ringing endorsement. Peter says what every one of us has said at some point in our lives when we *know* what the right thing is and yet we are unsure we want to do it because of what it's going to cost us. Peter says, “Lord, where else can we go? What other option do we have?”

If you haven't asked that question at some point in your life of faith, you will at some point.

Several years ago I stood one afternoon in front of the mirror in the bathroom of our tiny apartment in a Toronto high-rise. I looked in that mirror and saw an angry, hurt young man. I had just suffered a major setback in my life. I had failed to complete my dissertation by the appointed deadline. My whole life would now be delayed for a year, and all plans Connie and I had made would be put on hold.

With tears streaming down my face I shouted at that mirror, “I quit! I’ve worked and I’ve tried, and I can’t take it anymore. I QUIT!”

As I stood there bawling, I heard this little voice in my head that said, “so what are you going to do if you quit?”

I knew that quitting was not an option. Where would I go? What would I do? Sitting there on that bathroom floor in tears, I knew that God’s plan was the best plan. But I sure didn’t understand it, and I would have been thrilled to have another option. In that moment, I knew a little how Peter felt.

And so do you. Each of us, as we follow Jesus, arrives eventually at a place where your relationship with Jesus comes with a steep price tag, and where loyalty to that relationship is costly.

In those moments, we are prone to cry out, “Lord, I know there really are no other options, but just in case, are there any other options?”

We know the answer to that, of course. But that doesn't make us immune to sitting on a bathroom floor with tears in our eyes.

As we come to the table this morning, it may be that some of you here this morning find yourselves residing temporarily at this particular address in John's Gospel. You may be hurting, struggling with the high cost associated with walking with Jesus. And you may be hearing the question that Peter and the others heard: "what about you?"

I don't have any easy answers to offer you this morning. I do have another theory, however. My theory is this: whatever price you may be called upon to pay in order to walk with Jesus -- it's worth paying. Whatever struggle may confront you on the path -- it's worth struggling for. For ultimately, the struggle is not *our* struggle; it's God's.

So come this morning with faith. Receive the grace that strengthens you for the journey. And choose again in this moment to follow him -- wherever that may lead.

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.