

Epworth Chapel on the Green  
August 23, 2015  
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 6. Jesus says there: “I am the Bread of life. I am the Living Bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats this bread, he will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.”

In last week’s lesson, Jesus elevated the discussion even further by saying: “Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you...Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him” (John 6:51ff).

Today’s lesson picks up the conversation, as the disciples scratch their heads and say: “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 not only do the surrounding crowds reject what Jesus says, but so do many of his disciples.

There is a reason for this. The crowd, and especially Jesus’ followers, would have God’s Law ringing in their ears and in their hearts. These words, from Leviticus 17, would be very much on their minds, where God says:

*And I will turn against anyone, whether an Israelite or a foreigner living among you, who eats or drinks blood in any form. I will cut off such a person from the community, for the life of any creature is in its blood. I have given you the blood so you can make atonement for your sins. It is the blood, representing life, that brings you atonement. That is why I said to the Israelites, “You and the foreigners who live among you must never eat or drink blood.”* [Lev. 17:10-11]

And yet, Jesus has come into their lives as a new Moses, who not only provides bread from heaven but claims that *he himself is that bread*. And then, in language so graphic as to be almost repulsive, he says: “Unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood, you have no life in you.”

For those who hear him, what Jesus says here is intellectually indefensible. It is counter to reason. It stretches the limits of credibility and credulity. It is (literally) too much to swallow.

What are we to make of this?

I wonder. I wonder if the real obstacle to the disciples and those who turn away is not that Jesus’ words are intellectually implausible. I wonder if the real issue is that Jesus’ words are intellectually *scandalous*, because his words challenge them to see in a new way *who* he is and *how* he has come to fulfill God’s plan for their lives.

Jesus’ words are *scandalous* in the original sense of the term – that which causes one to trip, or to stumble. Jesus has not come to offer people a formula for how to be healthy and happy. Jesus has come to call persons into a relationship with God that is an open-ended, one-day-at-a-time proposition that involves

complete trust in God's power and very little trust in our own. Jesus calls people to a relationship that involves taking the life of God into their bodies by means of eating his flesh and drinking his blood.

It's an utterly scandalous notion. We know it is because this is the only recorded instance in the New Testament where followers of Jesus call it quits and stop following him. The literal force of his words is too much to bear. It becomes for them a "deal-breaker."

It is striking to me that Jesus has ample opportunity to correct these folks, to set them straight. He has a chance to say: "hey, folks, don't you recognize a metaphor when you see one?"

But he does not. He simply looks at his inner circle and asks: "What about you guys? Are you going to call it quits too?"

He challenges the confines of their thinking, the smallness of their thinking, by laying one miracle alongside another. He says: "If you are stumbling over the fact that I tell you that you must eat my flesh and drink my blood, what are you going to do when you see me ascend to the Father? Will you scoff at that also?"

I wonder if Jesus is drawing a line in the sand here for his twelve disciples in the same way Joshua draws a line in the sand for the twelve tribes of Israel at Shechem. Joshua gathers the people at Shechem (the same place where God called Abraham and promised to make him a great nation). And he issues them a blunt

challenge: Either renew your covenant with God, or turn and serve the gods of your ancestors.

And Jesus now issues his twelve disciples a blunt challenge: to enter a covenant relationship with him that is based on a miracle far greater than the manna their ancestors experienced on their way to the Promised Land. Jesus has promised them a new homeland – eternal life. And he now offers them his body and blood to strengthen them on their journey. And he asks them: “What about you? What will you do?”

I have always identified with Peter’s response to Jesus. Peter says: “Lord, where are we going to go? You alone have the words of eternal life.”

It’s 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 struggle to understand it and are unsure of what it might cost us. Peter says: “Lord, where else can we go? What other option do we have?”

It’s as if Peter says, “Lord, does this have to be so hard? We know you are the One sent from God to bring us eternal life, but the way you are going about it is enough to drive us all crazy!”

“Lord, where can we go? What other options do we have?”

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

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 the mirror and saw an angry, hurt (younger) man. I had just suffered the biggest setback of my life.

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’m done. To hell with it all. I QUIT!”

As I slumped to the floor, bawling, I heard this little voice say: “Where will you go? What will you do now?”

Sitting there blubbing, I knew that the inner voice was right. 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. Perhaps in that moment, I had a small glimpse of how Peter must have felt.

And so do you. Each of us, as we follow Jesus, eventually arrives at a place where your relationship with Jesus gets a bit costly, and where obedience to that relationship has a price. In those moments, we are prone to cry, “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 Lord's Table, some of you this morning may find yourselves residing temporarily at this particular address in John's Gospel. You may be hurting, struggling with the 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 easy answers for you this morning. But if past history is any help, I can say 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.

So come with faith. Receive the grace he offers you. Let it strengthen you on your journey. And choose again this day, this moment, to follow him – wherever it may lead.

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