

McCabe United Methodist Church
“To Whom Shall We Go?”
by Pastor Gary Walters
John 6:56-69

Our scripture lesson this morning comes from John, Chapter 6, and I'm going to start at verse 56. This is Jesus speaking. "Who ever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him. Just as the living father sent me and I live because of the father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven. Our forefathers ate manna and died. But the one who feeds on this bread will live forever." He said this while teaching in the synagogue in Capernaum. On hearing it, many of his disciples said "This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?". And then skipping down to verse 66: From this time, many of his disciples turned back and followed him no longer. Jesus turned to the 12 and asked "You do not want to leave also, do you?" But Simon Peter answered "Lord, to whom shall we go? You alone have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the holy one of God." The word of God for the people of God, Thanks be to God!

This is the lectionary reading for today and I would prefer to give the passage a little more context. They start at about the most startling spot you could choose with that whole line of flesh and blood, but it certainly grabs our attention. I have to tell you that this passage played a fairly significant role in my spiritual journey, particularly in college. In 1991 I headed off to South America to be a missionary for about seven months. They had warned me about the difficulty of adjusting to a new culture. What I found is, going and adjusting to life in South America was actually very easy. I was with an organization called Youth With a Mission, and I was surrounded by this vibrant worshipping community, that had a compelling vision and mission. We were engaged in Christian work on a daily basis and the teaching was unbelievable. It was seven months of being completely surrounded by God's presence. What I found is that coming back was rather difficult. I got back in December, had Christmas break with my family, and then turned around and went right back to college. Not that Dakota Wesleyan was such a godless place, on the contrary, but compared to the vibrant experience, the tangible experience of God that I'd been having in South America, being back at college I felt lost. I did not have that tangible, every day, vibrant experience of God's presence right there with me all the time. And I struggled at a lot of questions about, "Did I belong there?", "What was I supposed to be doing?", "Was I being faithful?" "If God was real, why couldn't I experience more of him at that time and that place?". I struggled through that semester greatly. But, I did pore over my Bible and about some time in April I came across this scripture passage. It was if God were speaking to me; particularly the latter part of the passage I just read. And when Jesus turns to his disciples and says "You do not want to leave, too, do you?" it was as though those words were being spoken to me. I latched onto Peter's response with all of my heart, "Lord to whom else shall we go, you alone have the words of eternal life."

That was a lot to hold onto and it was that assurance, that promise, that realization that there is no where else to go to have eternal life. Not just life when we are dead, but that quality of eternal life here and now, because when scripture talks about eternal life, it's not just for heaven, its not just for after we die, it is a quality, its a quantity of life here and now that is different, that is superior, that is fuller, that is more vibrant, that is more alive, than anything else that we might experience through all the different offerings that the world has to give. That the life Christ has to give is truly eternal life. Not

just because of its duration, but because of its quality.

Well grabbing onto that passage was pretty significant for me and I've lived with this passage then for quite a few years, since then. But, I have not always appreciated the fuller context of this passage. John heads into the passion narrative pretty quickly in his gospel. Really, at this event, up to now the crowds have been flocking to Jesus and following him willingly and gladly and happily, but at this point Jesus' face turns toward Jerusalem and the crowds will no longer follow him. There is a growing animosity toward Jesus and his ministry and his teaching that will eventually put him on the cross and the anxiety, the tension, rises from here. In the gospel story, the shadow of the cross looms ever near. This passage comes at a critical moment. Jesus knows that he is heading toward the cross, that this looms quickly in his future. You can hear the note of disappointment he has with those outer disciples who now are starting to peel away when he gets to the heart of his teaching. You can hear that note in his voice when he turns to the 12 and says "You don't want to leave, too, do you?" and how his heart must have thrilled, or warmed, at Peter's words "Lord, to whom else would we go, you alone have the words of eternal life, and we believe and know that you are the holy one of God."

So, here it was, there were a group of disciples, a group of people who would share his vision, who shared his mission, who understood at least partly what it meant that he was their messiah, that they believed he was the son of God, that when he was gone his mission would continue, that they would carry on that message, even to the ends of the earth. That what he was doing, what he was teaching, his mission on earth was not in vain.

Well, that's a pretty critical moment. But as I've read this passage, I've always assumed that when it talked about the blood and the flesh that it was referring to communion. But, I think that's far too tame an interpretation. Because if Jesus is simply foreshadowing communion, I don't think that these disciples would have been nearly as offended or would have found it nearly as difficult if Jesus was simply talking about some religious ritual, albeit a very significant one, but that would be so easy. So, the question comes to mind, why is Jesus' teaching so hard for these disciples. Why do so many of them turn away. Why do they choose to not follow Christ.

Now there is the obvious part of the graphicness of the illustration, and for the Jew it would be even moreso. They understood that to consume the blood of an animal was abhorrent, it just simply was not done, it was detestable to them, let alone human blood. The Jews considered that the blood held the life of the animal and that that life belonged to God and God alone and it was not theirs. To consume it was to be ceremonially unclean but to consume it was also an affront to God, it was to take from God what belonged to him and him alone. So, that image is pretty graphic, but also for religious reasons, pretty objectionable to those Jews.

But the passage makes it clear that this is an allegory, it's an image, it's a symbol and in fact the word that the disciples used, this is a hard teaching. It makes it clear that they understood what Jesus meant, that this was an allegory, that this was simply an image or a metaphor. But that word also carries with it, while they understood the meaning, it wasn't hard to understand, what it means is that it was hard to accept. So why is this teaching so difficult for them? Well again and again John in his gospel comes back to this idea that Jesus is the mind of God, made into a human being, made into human flesh, who lived and dwelt among us to display the heart of God for humanity. In doing so, he lived to give his life away, even to the point of dying on a cross.

The disciples who turned away from Jesus had their religious practices, their 10%, and the seasons that they went to the temple for worship and the synagogue on Saturday, and their other religious observances. I think that we have an image or a picture of Christianity, you do the right thing. You give your 10%, you live graciously with others, you help those who are in need, at least when it is within your means or within your convenience to do so. You go to church, at least most of the time. You pray and at least read your Bible occasionally; and I don't mean to belittle that or mock that, because there is a part where that's a pretty fair description of my Christianity. We have this image, this picture of what Christ presented as following him. But, I fear that it is too tame and that if we understood the full extent of what Christ was asking, I wonder what our response would be, would we be in that crowd of larger disciples who said "this is a hard teaching, who can accept it?"

Because what Christ is asking is for us, in taking in his very flesh and blood, is to take to our inner most being that lifestyle, that image, the teachings and the pattern of life that he held. A life that was lived, not for itself, but to be given away, first to God, but in being given away to God, then being given away an act and a word and a deed at a time, as he lived his life not for himself but for others. Those first disciples said, no thanks, I'll take 10%, and synagogue on Saturday, and those other religious practices. They knew that Christ wasn't asking for a part of their life, he was asking for all of it.

John uses the image of Jesus as the ultimate sacrifice and that he is. That his life, his blood, paid the penalty for sin that opened heaven's gates once for all. But in what Jesus says, he is asking us to participate in that, to live likewise, to live not for ourselves, but for God and for others. That he doesn't get the 10% and Sunday morning, but that he gets all of it. That that quality of eternal life might permeate every fiber of who we are, whether we are in worship or whether it's at work on Monday morning or in the classroom, or when we are with our coworkers, or our friends or our family. That no matter where we are at and what we are doing that that quality of eternal life permeates who we are, that there is a quality of life that is different because we are living it for God, giving it to God and thus giving it to others. That's what so different!

Even the world has a sense of "I need to do what's right" and we could name a list that kind of sets out the pattern, and it's not that different than the morality, the standard that Christ proclaimed. But what the world does not get that this idea that we were not given the gift of life simply for ourselves, but we were given the gift of life that we might give it to God and give it away for Christ's sake, and that's a hard teaching. But I think anything less is too tame.

I don't know that I have a challenge this morning, or an invitation, but I would ask that you let these words of Christ challenge you. Let them ask you the question, is the version of Christianity that you have adopted, that you follow, is it too tame, or is it this living, this radical living for God, this giving of giving life away, that Christ asked for here. For Christ said, "Those who gain their life in this world will lose it, but those who give their life away, in this world, will gain it for all eternity.". Would you pray with me?

Lord, help us, help us live life that was meant to be, life lived for you, given away, freely, extravagantly, wonderfully, that we might experience the fullness of eternal life here and now and in the life to come. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.