

Well, what did you expect?

Sermon on John 6:56-69

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Today's story in John 6 is one of those stories that you can go in a million and a half directions – but, what do you expect – it's Jesus we're talking about.

Let me give you the background of our story today:

In the gospel of John chapter 6 we read of a controversial few day with Jesus and his disciples. There were miracles, signs of wonder, words of confusion, doubt and choices about what to do about that doubt.

It all began with Jesus feeding five thousand people with five small barley loaves and two small fish.

This amazed the crowd so much that “they began to say, ‘Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world.’” But Jesus, recognized their hopes – and perhaps even their intention, on the spur of the moment to make him a king and he “withdrew to a mountain by himself.”

After that he crossed the lake with his disciples to Capernaum where the crowd, undeterred, hurried after him. They tormented him with questions: “What miraculous sign are you going to show us so that we'll believe you?” The crowds squabbled about how God had provided manna in the desert as a sign. Jesus responded with an extended discourse on bread from God and the assertion that he is, the Bread of Life. Jesus used words that connected himself with God who had revealed himself at Sinai as “I am who I am.” “I am the bread of life,” Jesus declared.

He said, “Your forefathers ate the manna in the desert, yet they died. But here is the bread that comes down from heaven, which we may eat and not die. **I am** the living bread that came down from heaven. If you eat of this bread, you will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.”

In the original manna story in Exodus, the Hebrews showed a mixed response to God's provision. Although they were really glad to have left Egypt, they immediately begins to “grumble” or “complain” against God and Moses in the wilderness (e.g., Exodus 15:24; 16:2). They didn't trust God to take care of them. Over and over in those 40 years in the wilderness, with questions of water, food, and physical safety, the Hebrews grumbled and wrestled with whether or not they would trust God to care for them. In fact, because of the grumbling and mistrust in God, that first generation of freed slaves died in the wilderness. Only their children and children's children could begin this new life.

But getting back to our story – Many felt that Jesus had pushed the boundaries with what he proclaimed. Those around him “grumbled because he said, ‘I am the bread that came down from heaven.’ The crowds and the many disciples surrounding him and peppering him for answers knew the story of the Israelites grumbling in the wilderness. But now Jesus was saying that HE was all they would need to survive. HE was the new manna – the bread sent from God. Would they have to EAT him? They just couldn't believe it. And then he said he would ascend to heaven? They said, ‘Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, ‘I came down from heaven?’”

And here's where we jump into today's text:

⁵⁶ 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, rather than breaking off at this point, only pushed the harder* and 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.”

Here’s the thing, we are so attuned to Jesus’ words that find it hard to understand how offensive Jesus’ teachings had become to his hearers by now. The hearers would have heard Jesus’ words very differently than we do. The disciples hear Jesus saying that HE IS manna – he IS the bread of life and anyone who eats (and they must eat him to abide in the father?)

That was the last straw!

⁶⁶“From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him.”

I can just hear the many disciples muttering amongst themselves as they skulk away from Jesus – “He can’t be for-real” and, “I’m not going to eat him – that’s blasphemy!” and “He’s taken this son-of-God thing too far” and “Well, what DID you expect. He is, after all, Joseph the carpenter’s son. Some of that saw-dust got wedged in his brain and is deluding him and those around him. Thank GOD we never really believed what he had to say.”

We know that when we “eat” Jesus as manna we are not really eating him. What Jesus means is that when we partake of Jesus as manna we are taking in and digesting and the teachings/presence/peace/life-giving-spirit of Jesus gives us the spiritual sustenance to make it through the wilderness to the promised land. It means relying on God to provide what we need. It means making the triune God a part of us so completely it fills every cell of our being. Abiding. Meno.

⁶⁷ So Jesus asked the twelve, “Do you also wish to go away?”

Staying with Jesus and learning from him is a long process – just like the Hebrews in the wilderness. For many, a quick fix would be more attractive. The crowd of disciples was initially attracted to Jesus when they saw him as a Moses figure -- one who could work miracles and provide political victories. But as they continued with him, they learned that Jesus is more than a Moses figure – he was everything that gave life to the people in the wilderness. And for some that was just too much mental and spiritual work to handle.

So Jesus asked the twelve, “are you going to leave too?”

It doesn’t surprise me that he asks that, after all, if the general populace was finding him a fraud and a blasphemer, wouldn’t it make sense that those closest to him would be asking themselves the same question. They likely didn’t find his teachings any easier to “digest” than the others did yet...their answer to Jesus was different.

⁶⁸ Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. ⁶⁹ We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."

Peter responded like he did – on behalf of the disciples – not because they understood more of what Jesus meant than those who had just left. In fact, we know that the 12 frequently questioned Jesus about what he meant by what he said. But the 12 knew one thing that made all the difference in the world, and that was summed in this phrase: "We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."

The ones that left didn't know or even pursue the glimpses of understanding that they had. But the Twelve, they had an inkling – they caught a glimpse – an occasional epiphany – and I believe it was this that made them stay and it is what brought them back time and time again.

So what about us? If we were to take a closer look at this whole passage – would we be able to see ourselves as disciples, as the crowds, as part of the 12? How would we respond? What DO we expect?

If we look at Jesus only on the surface – then it will not take much to walk away with disappointment. We might even mutter to ourselves, "He expects me to do WHAT? Pick up my cross?" "There is NO WAY that I'm going to pray for those who persecute me!"

Sometimes, though, we can't really read what Jesus is saying – the comforting words or the difficult words – especially when nothing seems to be going right... when there's this yawning hole of uncertainty or restlessness and nothing seems to satisfy our spirit. In those times the words of Jesus sometime seem to offer little by way of comfort or direction or even challenge. We are tempted, like the many disillusioned disciples to "turn back and no longer follow him."

Other times we are looking for direction, looking for God – looking for some sense that there even IS a God, and have such a hard time seeing a true and genuine God at work in our world – one that lives not only in scripture but also through the lives of Christ followers and through global events. At these times we may be tempted to conclude that the promises we once trusted are empty and the faith that we once held was misplaced. Perhaps we don't renounce or desert the Lord openly, we just don't make the extra effort to get to church regularly, or we reduce what we've been giving, are more reluctant to help others, or don't want to actually put in the difficult work of making it through, or we simply stop praying. In the end, we end up just like the deserting disciples in today's reading.

Over the years, I believe that many of us have come to think differently on the role of doubt and questions in faith. We've opened our eyes and aren't blindly cheering for some doped up easy faith. Many of us have learned through the hard questions and difficult times that times of doubt bring many rich possibilities into our lives. And many of us have learned that asking questions can lead to a greater understanding – nay even a transformed point of view.

Yahweh, the God who was is and is to come - the Word, the Spirit, and the LORD of all continues to call us into life. And God is reaching life in the midst of our apparent failures, doubts, and in our complacency. The church – the wider church and THIS CHURCH here and now is **still called** to be a light in places of darkness – comforting those afraid of the dark and shining brightly to expose all that is hidden in darkness.

And we have a choice. How do we respond to the difficult questions, the tough times, the hard decisions? Jesus is asking us – right now and always, "are you going to go too?" Our doubts and questions don't scare Jesus – how are you going to answer?
Oh Lord, to whom shall we go? YOU have the words of eternal life.