

Year B Proper 21 Remaining with Christ When Others Leave John 6:56-69

I find this Gospel story quite disturbing...some of Jesus' disciples actually leave him. To hear him speak of them eating his flesh and drinking his blood was too much for them. We hear that sort of talk each time we take the bread and wine here at the altar. We know it's not Jesus' physical flesh and we know it's not his physical blood...it's his presence. We may not understand how but we know Jesus' presence is in that bread and wine. The disciples in the Gospel story today aren't silly or stupid...They know Jesus isn't saying they'll be eating his real flesh and blood just like we know that and yet, something in those words – the same words that we hear with comfort - sounded dangerous enough, scandalized his followers so much, that they left him. What was it that scared them off?

For one thing, Jesus has started talking about himself in some pretty lofty language. The crowd that had started following this charismatic young teacher is now getting more than they bargained for. They started following Jesus because something about his life and ministry attracted them – he was an amazing teacher, he healed people, he fed people when there was no food. But now, now he's talking about himself as the "Holy One of God." This man of flesh and blood is claiming that he is something beyond flesh and blood.

The conversation had started innocently enough – Jesus seemed, to the crowd, to be another great prophet and leader like Moses, and so they had asked Jesus what he was going to do for them along the same lines as what Moses had done for the people he had led out of slavery in Egypt into the wilderness. God had been with Moses, helping him every step of the way, providing water and manna – the bread from heaven. Here was Jesus going way beyond this...he wasn't going to produce physical bread from heaven for them. He *is* the bread from heaven. The crowd has the same reaction to Jesus as

they did many generations earlier in the wilderness with Moses. They experienced God's miracles of provision and yet they grumble and complain and they just can't commit to wholeheartedly entering a trusting relationship – a relationship of reliance – on God.

This relationship of reliance is one that John returns to often throughout his Gospel using the concept of “abiding.” The Greek word, *meno*, that we hear as “abide” in today's Gospel is often translated as remain – “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood *remain* in me, and I in them.” These are the first words we hear Jesus speak today and they get to the heart of the problem that we then see in this Gospel...Abiding in Jesus – remaining with Jesus – is not easy.

Staying with Jesus and learning from him is a long process. For many, a quick fix would be more attractive. The crowd was initially attracted to Jesus when they saw him as a Moses figure – one who could work miracles and provide political victories. As they continue with him, they learn that Jesus is not offering an easy victory but the long road of discipleship.

Following Jesus isn't just about being healed or seeing other people being healed. It isn't just about listening to the words of a charismatic teacher. Following Jesus has social and universal implications. Those disciples following Jesus saw the kind of love and justice and compassion in and around Jesus that spoke to the truth about God. They realized *that* high standard was what they were expected to be like. Signing on to follow Jesus means committing to healing and changing not just ourselves but the world.

So, for those in the crowd who started following Jesus because they were attracted to what he could do for *them*, the idea that following Jesus *wasn't* about them, the idea that following Jesus would actually ask them to give much of themselves, those people found themselves saying, “Hey, wait a minute...we didn't sign up for this.”

When Jesus started talking about eating his flesh and drinking his blood, they knew he was serious...sharing a meal in those days was a big deal and, really, it still is – by eating with people, you were saying you approved of them, they were in your social group, you would take care of each other, share in each other's work and resources. Well, Jesus wasn't offering just any old meal – he was the meal. By staying with him, they would be saying they agree with him, he is part of their social group, they would share in his work. They would teach and heal and feed the hungry and take care of widows and fight injustice and...well, that teaching is a difficult teaching. For many that day, this was their cue to leave, to choose not to remain – to choose not to abide in Jesus.

We live in a throw-away, convenient, comfort first, me first sort of world. We see this on full display during the pandemic – people more concerned with self than others; people protesting the perceived loss of personal freedom rather than protecting neighbour. For many today, Jesus' words would still be their cue to leave. The countercultural claims of the Gospel are too much effort for a lot of people...work to help others instead of working to put myself ahead? Work to eradicate all the brokenness of the world instead of just being snug and happy in my personal relationship with God? This teaching is a difficult teaching.

However, Jesus' words didn't scare off the 12 disciples and it didn't scare us off. We're here and that means something. When Jesus turned to his disciples and asked, "Well, are you going to leave me, too?" he was turning to us. And when Peter answered, he answered for us. "Where else would we go? You have the words of eternal life."

We live in a broken world and we know it. We also know that we can help this world – help reveal to the world God's kingdom, by remaining with Jesus, by journeying the long road of discipleship. It means signing on to some values that push deeply against the culture. It involves a willingness to stand with the people Jesus stood with – those who

can do nothing for us in return. In a self-serving culture, many people around us will be confused by what we stand for, by our willingness to live a life centered around love and justice and not around ourselves. They may think it's quaint or they may think we are foolish. This life is certainly not for them – they don't need that.

When we first started hearing John's Gospel several weeks ago, we began with a huge, excited crowd of 5000. We are now down to 12...12 faithful disciples. The dwindling numbers mirror the experience of the church across the ages but Jesus does not despair in this.

The ones who remained with Jesus that day, knew they needed him and knew the world needed him. For remaining with Jesus means accepting the difficult teaching, accepting that abiding with Jesus means abiding with the poor, the sick, the oppressed – all those whom the world sees as weak, all those whom Jesus stood with. Abiding in Jesus will involve doing hard things and seeing hard things but it will also involve joy in standing with those whom Jesus, in the Beatitudes, calls "blessed."

There is the story of a school teacher who was assigned to visit children in a large city hospital who received a routine call requesting that she visit a particular child.

The teacher took the boy's name and room number, and was told by the teacher on the other end of the line, "We're studying nouns and adverbs in this class now. I'd be grateful if you could help him with his homework, so he doesn't fall behind the others."

It wasn't until the visiting teacher stood inside the boy's open doorway that she realized it was located in the hospital's burn unit. No one had prepared her to find a young boy horribly burned and in great pain.

The teacher felt that she couldn't just turn around and walk out. And so she stammered awkwardly, "I'm the hospital teacher, and your teacher sent me to help you with nouns and adverbs." This boy was in so much pain that he barely responded. The young teacher stumbled through his English lesson, distraught and embarrassed at putting him through such a senseless exercise.

The next morning a nurse on the burn unit asked her, "What did you do to that boy?" Before the teacher could finish her outburst of apologies, the nurse interrupted her: "You don't understand. We've been very worried about him. But ever since you were here yesterday, his whole attitude has changed. He's fighting back; he's responding to treatment. It's as if he has decided to live."

When he was well enough, the boy explained that he had completely given up hope until he saw the teacher. It all changed when he came to a simple realization. With joyful tears, the boy said: "They wouldn't send a teacher to work on nouns and adverbs with a boy who was dying, would they?"

Our lives have purpose and meaning because we stand with Jesus, and with him everyone else who is weak. And we know that he will do great things through us because God works through what the world considers weak.

We have chosen the journey of discipleship – to remain in Christ as he remains in us. We have chosen to eat his flesh and to drink his blood.