

I've got to be honest: I'm ready for this sermon series to be over. It sounded like a good idea at first, but all of Jesus's talk about "the bread of life" and "eating his flesh" and "drinking his blood" has gotten old. I'm done with it. I'm ready to move on. And so are the people in today's scripture.

"This is a difficult teaching," some of his disciples say. "Who can accept it?" they ask.

Not our son, Yates.

At our Maundy Thursday communion service a couple of years ago I referenced this passage of scripture and Jesus's words to "eat [his] flesh and drink [his] blood." And when it was time, I stood at the table and spoke of the body of Christ and the blood of Christ. I broke the bread. I held the cup. I invited people to come forward. But Yates, about four at the time, wouldn't leave his seat. My wife kept trying to get him to go up front with her, but he would not budge. She finally asked him why – what was the matter – and he whispered to her, "I don't want to eat someone."

And he's not alone. There are at least 4,988 others who find it difficult and can't accept it.

This episode in John's Gospel begins with Jesus's miraculous feeding of five thousand people. But when he launches into a sermon, the people gets restless. **(I can relate.)** The curious crowds and looky-loos begin to disperse, and by the end of his discourse on the bread of life, we read that "Many turned back and no longer went about with him." Jesus shouldn't even have to ask if what he has said is scandalous; if it offends them. It clearly must have, because in just a few dozen verses the throng of five thousand has dwindled to just the original Twelve.

But what, exactly, is so scandalous – so offensive – about Jesus here?

Why do so many turn back from following him?

Well, for one, Jesus feeds them *before* they had to listen to him. People had seen the miraculous healings and signs he had done for the sick, and wanted to see more. They were intrigued. But instead of capitalizing on their curiosity and interest – instead of making them wait to eat until after he spoke – he went ahead and gave them food. And if you've ever sat through a pitch for long-term care insurance or a time-share in Florida, you know that you would not have endured it if you weren't getting free all-you-can-eat prime rib afterward.

So it's not all that surprising that many people left after they were fed. Once they were filled – once their needs were met – they had no problem moving on. Some people claim that there's a consumer mindset in our churches has infiltrated the church because of our materialistic modern society, or they blame it on supposedly selfish Millennials. But, as we see here, it's been around since the beginning of the first millennium. People were intrigued by the cool stuff Jesus was doing and they hung around long enough to benefit from some of it, to feel good because of it, even to be fed by it. But then they got bored, or they didn't feel as excited about it, or they weren't getting what they wanted from him, and they drifted away.

I also think people also turned back from following Jesus because of his message. I mean, he wasn't preaching about money, or human sexuality, or (worst of all) politics... But what he said *is* offensive to our basic sensibilities, as my son's reaction to communion shows.

Eating flesh and drinking blood? Gross!

It's just not kosher. Literally!

It is not a part of the Jewish dietary laws. There are verses (a *bunch* of verses!) in our holy scriptures – more verses than many of the other sins we argue about, in fact – that explicitly prohibit the eating of animal flesh with blood in it. Jesus is telling these people to do something the Bible specifically says not to. It says it in Genesis 9, Leviticus 7, Leviticus 17, Leviticus 19, Leviticus 26, Deuteronomy 28... He is telling them to ignore commandments that were *in their Bible* – commandments that are still in *your Bible*.

And then there's this whole idea in Jesus's teachings that he *is* the bread of life – that he has been sent by God to bring life (abundant and eternal), and that gives of his own self to *sustain* us. That's a difficult concept to listen to, to wrap our minds around, to fully understand and actually ***believe*** – to put our faith in; to entrust our lives to.

That's what belief really means...at least it did. The theologian Harvey Cox says we have replaced *faith in* Jesus with *beliefs about* him. But faith is more than belief. Faith is a profound trust; a deep-seated confidence. As Cox puts it,

We can *believe* something to be true without it making much difference to us, but we place our *faith* only in something that is vital for the way we live.¹

¹ Harvey Cox, *The Future of Faith*, 3.

I think that might be the biggest reason people began to turn away from following Jesus in this passage. Perhaps this is the moment they begin to realize that not only is he will vital for the way they live, but also that he will change the way they live, because he will live in them and through them. Maybe here they begin to realize not only how comforting it is that he promises to abide with them and they with him, but also what that abiding will ask of them. The real scandal here – what really ought to offend – is not the language of eating flesh and drinking blood, but what the Apostle Paul called the scandal of proclaiming Christ crucified² – of putting the self-giving life and life-giving death of Jesus at the center of our lives.

And that is not easy.

This *is* a hard teaching.

It *is* a difficult word.

² 1 Corinthians 1:23

It is a difficult word because the Word-made-flesh comes to us and offers himself to us and invites us to follow in the difficult and demanding journey of discipleship.

It is difficult to seek to serve and not be served; to set aside our desires and our preferences; to want not only to be fed, but to feed others, too.

It's difficult to see the image of God in others when they are just so...different...and weird...and annoying...and sometimes downright mean.

It's difficult to love *ourselves* – when we make promises to ourselves and to God that we can't seem to keep; when we're not able to forgive ourselves for all the things we've done.

It's difficult to reach out to our neighbor when their sadness overflows and threatens to pull us under, too, if we get too close.

It's difficult to try to lift up our brothers and sisters in despair, when the forces of injustice conspire to keep them down.

It's difficult to *abide with Christ* (as the Gospel writer puts it), and he with us;

to follow in his way and go where he goes and do what he does;

to allow him to live in us and through us.

A couple of months ago I was having breakfast with a friend of mine who is a recovering addict, and I asked him how his life was. He said something like, "You know, when I was addicted to drugs my life was pretty simple. From the time I woke up to the time I went to sleep, the only thing I cared about was how to get drugs, or how to get money to buy drugs. But now I've got all this other stuff I care about: my family and my job and my church. And I'm trying to live like Jesus would want me to – to pay my bills, to be a part of the church, to be a good husband and a good father, to help others, to do the right thing, to do what Jesus would want me to do..."

"But it's hard," he said. "In a lot of ways, it's harder than being addicted to drugs. It's hard to get addicted to life."

It might not be a pretty picture of faith the Gospel writer paints for us in this passage, but it is a realistic one. It's an accurate portrayal of the difficulty of belief and the demands of discipleship – of believing in and trusting in and having faith in and *following* Jesus, allowing his life to consume our own. I think that's why – of the 5,000 people Jesus fed with a few loaves and fishes – 4,988 of them *don't*.

But twelve do.

We might think it's because they were some kind of flawless saints – more faithful or more holy, or smarter or wiser, or more courageous, or basically just *better* than the others. Certainly better than any of us.

And yet we see them regularly misunderstanding Jesus's message and mission, as we do. They were often plagued by fear and doubt, as we are. They sometimes suffered from a surplus of pride and a shortage of courage.

(Guilty.) One of them would even betray Jesus, another would deny him, and they would all desert him when he needed them most. (I don't know about you, but I've done all three of those in one way or another at some point in my life.)³ Surely they had some of the same doubts and struggles as many of those who turned back from following...as many of us.

So what is it that sets *them* apart?

³ David Lose, "Pentecost 13B: Looking for God," ...*in the Meantime*, August 17, 2015, <http://www.davidlose.net/2015/08/pentecost-13-b/>.

Peter says, "Lord, to whom can we go? Where else *would* we? You have the words of life."

Somehow, they saw and sensed – in Jesus – *life*: abundant and everlasting. They saw and sensed the way he made them come alive; and the way he offered life to others – healing, feeding, caring, forgiving, loving. So even with the difficult teaching, even with the demands of discipleship, even with the offensive grace and scandalous love, even with their doubts and struggles and fears and failures, they still followed.

And perhaps that's all he wants us to do, too – nothing more, but nothing less.

[Kaci Roper sings *I Will Follow*]

A preacher I know of shared that she had recently attended a communion service. And as she went toward the front, she passed a little boy, maybe three years old, whose mother had apparently decided was too young to participate; that he wouldn't understand. So the mom was holding the little boy on her lap. And as the people filed by, a question popped into the little boy's head and he had the good sense to blurt it out.

"Mommy! Where are all the people going?"

"Shhhh!"

But he wouldn't have it. "Where are they going?!"

And before she could clamp her hand over his mouth, he was able to cry out, "I want to go, too!"

See, I think he did understand what was happening – maybe more so than most of us. When we come together in this place and around this table as a community of faith, we are going somewhere. Because we are on a journey with Jesus, nourished and sustained by his life as he abides with us and us with him; as he lives in us, and through us, brings life to the world.⁴

⁴ Alyce McKenzie, "Jesus' Journey and Ours," Patheos, August 20, 2012, <http://www.patheos.com/progressive-christian/jesus-journey-and-ours-alyce-mckenzie-08-20-2012.html>.

And so today, if you would like to begin that journey of following Jesus, or take the next step in your journey of faith, we encourage you to do so. That may happen in a private way, right where you sit. Or perhaps you'd like to make a public response, or to join this church, by coming forward. If so, we will welcome you gladly and walk with you in this journey of life and faith, and I invite you to come forward as we sing our closing hymn. Let's all stand and sing together.

[#305 – *I Have Decided to Follow Jesus*]

COMMUNION

Because those Twelve continued to follow Jesus – despite their doubts and in spite of their fears and failures – they made it here: to the table.

At that Last Supper, Jesus once again fed those gathered around him. But this time he fed them, not only with bread, but by sharing his life with them; his body and his blood.

Once again he broke the rules and broke with tradition. He gave them a new commandment: that they love one another as he loved them; that they continue in his way; that they allow his life and love to abide in them and live through them.

And having shared that meal, strengthening and sustaining them, he once again called them (and all of us) to the difficult journey of discipleship – to follow in his way, and in doing so, to allow God to work through us to bring light and love and life to the world.

We'll have two stations here at the front. We invite you to come forward using the two middle aisles, and return to your seat using the outside aisles.

You can take a piece of bread and dip it in the cup and eat it before you return to your seat. There will be wine and juice at both stations. The *wine* will be in the **gold** cups, the *juice* in the **pottery** cups.

And if you are unable to come forward, we'll be happy to bring communion to you after everyone else has come forward.

So come. And here, may we find strength and sustenance – bread for the journey – as we follow Jesus wherever he may lead us.