

The 13<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 16. August 23, 2015 John 6: 56-69  
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Jesus fails to convince! Right here, in this story! Jesus fails to convince! “It’s a hard saying,” his own disciples said (and remember, the “disciples” were a larger group than the 12 - maybe several hundred) – “it’s a hard saying; too hard!” And they left.

Have you ever found yourself saying, of an idea, or a claim, or a position, “this is too much! I’m leaving!”? I remember walking out of a play when I was in college - I think it was “A Day in the Death of Joe Egg” - when the playwright began a full frontal assault on organized religion. I couldn’t get my mind around the obvious criticisms he had, and I took offence and left.

It was obviously hard for many of those listening to Jesus. Not all of them left, but it seems apparent that even those who stayed were challenged.

But then, pretty much everything Jesus did and said challenged someone! And the people who he challenged the most, I think, were his own disciples, and especially the Twelve.

Do you find following Jesus hard? I do. There’s an old saying about pastors – which I think applies equally well to Jesus – that the role of a pastor is “to comfort the afflicted, and afflict the comfortable.”

Jesus is the example of exactly that: he keeps doing this stuff that no one expects! And he keeps saying this stuff that most people don’t want to hear! But they/we need the gifts and words he offers – it’s just so hard!

Today, the difficult words have to do with eating human flesh, and drinking human blood – at least that’s what we often assume that most of Jesus’ disciples thought. And it would be hard to fault them on that assumption – one of the most common charges throughout the Empire against Christians was that they were cannibals – and I’ve heard that in our time, too!

That is still a misunderstanding today. And there are some scholars still trying to find an alternate understanding of what Jesus said about this, because they’re challenged by the same potential understanding. Episcopal priest and biblical scholar Bruce Chilton has claimed that Jesus was unable to make a traditional animal sacrifice at the Temple on behalf of his disciples earlier on the day of what we call the Last Supper, and so when he said “this is my body given for you, this is my blood shed for you” he actually meant “this bread and wine I hold in my hands stand in for the body and blood of my intended sacrificial animal.” The sacrifice is literal and symbolic, but of an animal sacrifice, not that of Jesus.

Most biblical scholars – with Chilton – call us to be careful at taking Jesus’ words literally, understanding them to have a deeper, symbolic meaning. These scholars think it most likely that John was comparing walking with Jesus to walking with Moses, that Jesus as bread from heaven echoed the Manna in the wilderness as God’s gift from heaven. The behavior of the Israelites and

that of the disciples as described by John was almost identical in both cases – remember that after God’s people originally celebrate their freedom from slavery they fairly quickly begin to grumble and complain (Exodus 15:24; 16:2). They don’t trust God to take care of them. Over and over, with questions of water, food, and physical safety, the Israelites play out the same drama: will they/can they trust that God will care for them?

This is exactly what’s happening in John’s gospel.

John is asking his readers – including us – a question – “do you trust Jesus as the Manna from God, as the Manna of God?” As spiritual food in our spiritual wildernesses? It’s a cluster of questions that lie at the heart of our own faith, and of what we do here each week. It’s a question that was obviously very important to John because it crops up several times in his gospel, and always in similar circumstances, around being fed, with the disciples responses mirroring those of the Israelites in the desert.

If you understand Jesus as Manna, if you see it through the lens of the story of the Exodus, then one thing is immediately obvious – if you partake of Jesus as Manna you’re making a statement about your reliance on God. When you eat this eucharistic bread and drink from this eucharistic cup you are making a public gesture and statement that you rely on God.

To make this point John uses a unique word : “abide” – and he uses that word throughout his gospel. It’s in today’s passage: “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood *abide* in me and I in them.”

Feeding on Jesus as manna means remaining or abiding with Jesus. We’re called to remain in proximity with Jesus. And if we can do that, then the promise is...what? It’s life. Life in all its richness, in all its fullness – life, not death, life.

But as the disciples continually found out – and as I think we all know – “abiding” with Jesus is difficult. Staying with Jesus and learning from him is a long process; there’s no attractive, quick fix. John tells us that the crowd was initially attracted to Jesus when they saw him as a Moses figure – one who could work miracles and provide political victories – and they became his disciples. As they continued with him, they learned that Jesus wasn’t offering an easy victory but the long and often hard road of discipleship. Loving your neighbor doesn’t come easily to most of us - it doesn’t come easily to me. That reality goes a long way to explaining why we seem to have been living in a constant state of war for so long. Yet it is the hard road of abiding in God’s love, in Jesus’ presence that lies at the heart, at the end of all things.

Ultimately, despite their failures, the Twelve – at least at this moment – actually do abide with Jesus, even though his teaching is difficult. Initially their reason sounds a little self-serving: because there’s no where else to go. But then we hear a really profound statement of faith: “we’re staying because you have the words of life.” They trust – at least for now – that God will provide manna. They stick closely to Jesus, who is the manna, and they listen to his words.

And, indeed, where else would they go? If this story mirrors the Exodus story then we know that

the only alternative the Israelites had to sticking with God was to return to slavery in Egypt.

And perhaps that's our metaphor, too. The alternative to abiding here with Jesus is to return to those ways of living our lives that held us captive, that offered death, not life. Perhaps, like the disciples, it will have to be an "at least for now" commitment. But maybe, just maybe, if we can hang in there, "just for now," taking the next step, and then the next step, we'll come to understand something of what it really means to abide with Jesus, and be fed by the bread from heaven that is so much more than ordinary food.

"Lord, to whom would we go? You have the words of eternal life" (John 6:68).