

This Teaching is Difficult
A Sermon for the Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost
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Jesus said, "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. 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." He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum.

When many of his disciples heard it, they said, "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?" But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, "Does this offend you? Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. 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. And he said, "For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father."

Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. So Jesus asked the twelve, "Do you also wish to go away?" Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God." John 6:56-69

If you are on a low carb diet then August has not been your month at church! We've heard about bread every week, for five weeks. How much easier all of this would be to swallow if Jesus had said, "this is the bread from heaven that has no carbs, no calories and it is the most delicious bread you have ever tasted!" At the same time, it's been a month (some would say 18 months) of one crisis after another. Is there a connection between the true bread from heaven and the innumerable crises of life?

What's going on in your life that you are experiencing as crisis? How might the presence of God Incarnate, Jesus, the true bread from heaven become the flesh and blood that sustains you? And the crises in our personal lives are overshadowed by all that is going on in the world around us. Earthquakes, fires, floods, famines, war, and plague. It's like we are living in biblical times. But of course, as people of faith, we do live our lives in biblical times.

There is also a crisis going on in the church. It began decades ago but we chose not to see it coming. When the pandemic began, it ripped off all the band aids we had been putting on the church for years. It uncovered what had been hidden – a church structure, a way of doing things, that were no longer working very well. Our Vestry has been exploring this for the past few months.

Many of us can remember the church growth of the 1950's, after World War II, when church nurseries were noisy, and all the Sunday School classrooms were full; youth groups were active and there was a mission trip every year. Good times! But since the 1970's there has been a slow and steady decline in church attendance across denominations. It was beginning to look like

failure, and because we don't like failure, the churches made excuses, looked the other way, insisted they were the exception to the churches in decline, and powered on with the usual programming. We all lamented that people were not in church every Sunday and volunteering in all the ministries we were sure must be done, but we were certain they'd all come flocking back through the doors again soon.

We live in a culture of success where everything is measured by the numbers and where sadly, failure is not seen as a learning experience but as defeat. We count how many people are in the pews and how many new pledges there are; we think we need to offer lots of programming and mission opportunities. This is how everything is measured in the world around us, so we think it should be this way in the church. In fact, the church still asks for all these numbers on the annual parochial report. But we cannot compete with the surrounding culture, and we are not called to do that. We are not called to entertain, to look away from injustice, or satisfy our own desires. We are called to follow Jesus and share the words, and the bread and the love of God with everyone who is looking for life in the midst of crisis.

At the beginning of chapter six in John's Gospel, Jesus fed 5,000 people and they followed him, even chased after him, because in him they sensed something they longed for, hungered for, that they could not quite describe or understand. By the end of chapter six, they are falling away, unable to accept the difficult teaching of Jesus. The followers shrink from 5,000 to 12, and in the two verses that follow our assigned reading today, Jesus notes that even one of the 12 will fall away and betray him. Those first followers were right there in the flesh with Jesus, they saw the miracles and heard his teaching and still they fell away.

There is a profound truth in this challenge from Jesus to his followers, one that reaches across the centuries and into the church today. The disenchanted will depart when the teaching becomes difficult. When the choice becomes following Jesus into the crises of this world or walking away, we will hesitate. When Jesus calls us in a new direction, we may decide it's too risky, too uncertain, too difficult. Those of us who have been in the church, who have been in this parish, for a long time, have seen the miracles here, have memories we treasure of the way things used to be. When Jesus calls us to a new thing, will we too fall away? We have a decision to make. We are being invited to follow, and to be drawn into the heart of God.

This is the essence of discipleship, to follow Jesus even if it means leaving behind our personal desires or our comfortable ways of doing things. We are faced with this decision every day in the church and in the world. Like the 5,000 and even the 12, we waffle back and forth in our faith. Will we make the effort to get up and go to church? Will we make a financial commitment to support the work of the parish? Will we attend a Bible study or be intentional about ten minutes of contemplative prayer each morning? Will we care for the community around us?

Saying, "Yes, Lord," may mean it's time to let go of the ministries that no one will volunteer to manage and look for new opportunities to proclaim Christ in the world. Every day we can choose to complain or to pitch in. Every day we can choose to love our neighbors or ignore them. Every day we can choose to say, "Yes, Lord, I believe," even when the teaching is difficult. Because some days it will be difficult, sometimes even before we get out of bed and read the news or get the phone call that someone we know has COVID.

John makes clear in his gospel that unbelief can be found not only among “those” on the outside, but also among those of us in the church, and even within ourselves on any given day. Where do we find ourselves in this story? As we move forward through and beyond this pandemic and the denominational church decline, are we the ones who are saying, “this is difficult, who can accept it?” Or are we saying, like Peter, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.”

Believing in Jesus means being in relationship, being part of a community, abiding with and having Jesus within us. This is the meaning of Incarnation. When Jesus says, “unless you eat of this bread you shall not have life within you,” it’s not a command to come to the communion table if you want to get to heaven, but a way of describing just how deeply Jesus abides in us. No human language can adequately describe God. The language of eating may be the best language we have to express this heavenly mystery, this mutual indwelling and communion that is the source of real life. Jesus calls us to open our minds to the spirit of what he is teaching. It sounds incredible and even offensive at first, but listen in a deeper way. I am the Word, the Bread, the Life. Communing with me, you will truly live. Abide in me, as I abide in you. Take and eat. Open your minds and lift up your hearts.

In a moment we are going to sing Hymn 335, “I am the bread of life,” a hymn that some of us love, and some of us do not love, for various reasons. For some of us the tune is difficult, or the theology is difficult. For others of us the hymn is an old favorite and the words and music draw us more deeply into God’s presence. But for all of us, I am convinced that in Christ we can do hard things!

For this one hymn, I invite you to sing along if you would like. Whether or not we like this hymn, whether or not we like what is changing around us or causing crisis for us, we are gathered here in all of our differences, abiding in Christ, and feasting on the Word and the Sacrament of Communion. May we be fed and know that we are one Body in Christ. And then, may we go into the world, sharing the words and the bread and the love of God with everyone who is looking for life in the midst of crisis. Amen.