

John 6: 56-69 A Hard Teaching

In chapter 6 we have moved from one side of the Sea of Galilee to the other. This is the fourth Sunday we have been in Capernaum where Jesus has been addressing the crowds which sought him there after he had fed them abundantly. They have proclaimed him a prophet and seek to be fed again. Jesus then begins teaching them about a different type of bread, the eternal bread of life. Verse 59 of this text tells us that Jesus has been teaching these things in the synagogue. Jesus often went to the synagogue as he traveled the countryside to teach from the scriptures already given to the people. For the last two Sundays we have heard that in the crowds there were “Jews” complaining about his teaching: the teaching that he was the bread of life. They have asked for a sign, a sign like that given to the Israelites in the desert, the manna from heaven. Jesus uses request and their teachings about this event in their history to explain the difference between what he is offering and what was provided in the wilderness for those forty years. Based on the feeding of the five thousand, they were excited that Jesus would provide them bread as Moses had done. Jesus tells them that bread only sustained life for a short time. Those who ate it later died while the bread he is offering would give eternal life. Jesus then goes on to explain that Moses did not actually provide the bread that was eaten, but that God had. Additionally he tells them that he has come down from heaven like that bread in order to provide to them a non-perishable bread, an even better sustainer of life. Some begin to have issues with his teaching. The fact that Jesus states that he is that bread from heaven, the bread of life-- the living bread causes some complaining among them. They understand what Jesus is claiming. By saying he can provide life eternal which they know only God can do, Jesus is identifying himself as God. What they don't understand is how this man who walks among them, whose background is similar to theirs, can possibly be what he claims to be. When Jesus' teaching moves on to the claim that believing this, or eating of this bread, is what is necessary to obtain eternal life; they reject the idea. The complainers in the crowd take this teaching in a literal sense; they connect it to cannibalism and drinking of blood which is strictly forbidden under their Levitical laws. We understand Jesus' words very differently today as referring to the sacrifice of his life for ours. We understand that Jesus offered his flesh, his body on the cross; that his blood was shed there for us; that this was done for our redemption and reconciliation with God. Although today's passage is a continuation of this same teaching to those who followed him to Capernaum, here focus has shifted. Jesus has moved on to promising that those who believe him, those who accept his teachings that God's will for them will be mediated in his own body, will be rewarded with eternal life. Our opening verse 56 contains this promise: “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.” We are told the response to this teaching in verse 60: when many of his disciples heard it, they said: “This teaching is difficult, who can accept it?” Here John no longer refers to those

listening to Jesus as the crowd, or even as the complaining Jews, but as disciples. Disciples are those who come to a teacher and learn from him and then follow the precepts he has taught. Jesus is offering life—eternal life—to those who are his disciples. And many of them find this offer difficult to accept. They find it hard to imagine life beyond what they know; they cannot envision life beyond their basic needs, beyond survival. Because they cannot see the divine in Jesus, because he is not how they expected the will of God to be revealed, many of the disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. They had come looking for God, but were not able to see and understand this revelation of God's nature. From our place in time as resurrection people we are inclined to look at those who rejected Jesus and turned away with disdain. We are inclined to write them off as those too lazy or too unfaithful to believe. But we need to recall that in this passage John does not refer to those who leave as a crowd or even as complaining Jews as earlier in the narrative, but refers to them as disciples. The people in today's reading who now desert Jesus are precisely those in the past who had in fact believed in Jesus. They had given up much to follow him around the countryside which was why they had been among those fed at the beginning. They have been following, watching and waiting, wondering and worrying. Now they have grown tired as what they expected does not seem to be happening. They can no longer see what it was about Jesus that attracted them to him in the first place, and so they leave. In many ways, this passage has a message that is very pertinent to the life of discipleship that we follow. It speaks to the fact that there are times in our lives when we may have wondered whether we believe in vain. When we earnestly pray for someone or something, when we question the why of events in our lives or those of our loved ones, when we see all the ill will in the world around us, when our hopes come to naught—do we not sometimes question? At these times we are looking for God and God's activity in the present. At these times we can have a hard time seeing God in what is taking place. At these times we are also tempted to conclude that the promises we trusted were empty and the faith we hold is misplaced. Perhaps we don't actually renounce or desert the Lord, but we find it more difficult to pray. We become more reluctant to follow the teachings of Jesus to love others. The picture the gospel draws for us today is not a pretty one because it tells us about some who had at first followed Jesus but who then left. But it is a fairly realistic description of the life of discipleship. It is an accurate portrait of disbelief where Jesus is surrounded by those who wanted to believe, who used to believe, who have been trying to believe, but who have not been able to fully commit and have finally given up. For some of those who left, it seems that something else might have also happened. Jesus asks those who were complaining if his teaching was offensive to them. When Jesus makes the transition that it not his teaching that is the bread of life, but his very flesh, his life then what he is teaching becomes difficult. When the message we have to accept is that eternal life is not something that comes not by what we do, think, perform but it is a gift which came at the cost of Jesus' earthly life, do we fully accept this? Do we acknowledge that no matter how "good" we are,

that is not what grants us salvation? We don't like giving up the idea that we control things. When we think of what Jesus required of his disciples in the way they treated others—show mercy and love, even to your enemies; have table fellowship with those who are outcasts from society—do we follow or are we offended? Because if we really accept that everlasting life does not come from anything we do, how can we pass judgment on others? These are things which make what Jesus taught difficult for us as well as it had for some of those who had been following him. Yet when Jesus turned to the twelve with the question “Do you 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.” Although Peter would also deny Jesus later, the truth of these words brought Peter back to a life of discipleship after the crucifixion. Although sometimes our life's pathway causes us to question God's presence, we too must respond like Peter. “Lord, to whom can we go but to you?” For in our turning toward God instead of away we will find that Jesus is there with us through all the difficult things. When we turn toward God's love, we find comfort and strength and hope for the future. Truly nothing external can separate us from the love of God shown through Christ Jesus. Thanks be to God.