

August 26 – Pentecost +14

Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Joshua+24%3A1-2%2C+14-18&version=NRSV>

Ephesians 6:10-20

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Ephesians+6:10-20>

John 6:56-69

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John+6:56-69>

After six weeks in a row this Sunday marks the last time that we'll be reading from John 6. Many parts of this chapter center on Jesus' saying He is the bread of heaven, the bread of life. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever, but the bread that Jesus is talking about is His flesh. And as if that wasn't confusing enough, Jesus says, "my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink." When we looked at last week's section of John 6 we explored what this might mean. In flesh and blood Jesus giving us everything that He has for our sake. Here the wholeness of God's heart, spirit, love, grace, hope, everything, meets the wholeness of us and the entirety of humanity. Jesus uses all sorts of metaphors and analogies to let us know about the love and care that God has for us. Jesus is the shepherd and we are the sheep; he is the vine and we are the branches; he abides in God and we abide in him; we consume Christ, so that He might dwell in us and fill us. It's still a mystery as to how this happens, we can't just simplify everything and explain it, because there's also an element of faith required.

At the beginning of our gospel reading it says, "When many of his disciples heard it, they said, 'This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?'" It's a very appropriate question, not just for those who were listening but also for our time as well. This teaching is difficult, who can accept it? Who can accept the teaching that Jesus is the living bread, sent down from heaven, and that unless we take part in this bread, then we have no life in us? This teaching is indeed challenging, but Jesus continues speaking.

"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 words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father." And right after these words it says that because of this many of Jesus' disciples turned back and no longer walked with Him anymore. They stopped journeying together. What was it about Jesus' words that caused these disciples to stop following? Were they too offensive, or too challenging, or blasphemous? Maybe they just didn't jive well with their understanding of this person they thought they knew. What if it wasn't so much what Jesus said this time that caused them to turn back, but rather that for the first time they saw Jesus for who He was claiming to be? In other words perhaps the Jesus they had been building up in their mind was different from the real Jesus. If we use John's gospel to try to imagine what some of the followers have witnessed, we might get a sense of why they're following Jesus. Here's a guy whose ship has come in, whose stock is going up while John the Baptist's is going down. Jesus is talking to women, He's healing people, He's a bit of a rebel and puts the Pharisees in their place when they try to challenge Him. Everything's kind of happy go lucky at the moment. But then He starts talking about His body as flesh and heavenly bread, His blood being true drink, and that He has come down from heaven and is going up later on to be with God, who He calls Father. Maybe this isn't the guy we

thought we knew. Maybe this isn't the one we've been waiting for, who was going to make Israel great again and get rid of those Roman oppressors. Maybe it's time to look for another teacher who's less insane, or at least one willing to fight against the Empire.

Maybe Jesus' words about giving up Himself for others seems cowardly. Even if, and that's a big if, but even if Jesus was the bread of heaven sent down to earth, perhaps the idea of Jesus leaving to even possibly return to heaven instead of staying and ruling on earth seems pointless. Why should someone continue to follow? Actually Jesus asks the twelve disciples, "Do you also wish to go away?" Simon Peter answers 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.

We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God. This is what separates the disciples who turn back from the ones who stay. And I think this passage can still speak directly to us today. These teachings about Jesus are difficult, so who can accept it? Do we worship the Jesus we think we know, that we build up in our minds, or do we actually worship Jesus? Sometimes it can be hard to tell the difference, but think about this, Donald Trump claims to be a Christian, right? And televangelists teach using the Bible. And we're here worshipping God. You might have a hard time believing we're all worshipping the same God, that we're all followers of Jesus. Why is that? Are we worshipping the Jesus we build up in our minds, or the actual Jesus? Are we looking to follow a leader that is all powerful, who defeats enemies, cures illnesses, calms storms, or seeking after someone who has no money, no famous heritage, but gives everything that He has for our sake? These are all aspects of Jesus, but one side is not meant to be taken in isolation. But rather, having witnessed Jesus' ability to do incredible things, having come to believe that Jesus is who He claims to be, the difference is in choosing to continue the journey with Christ. When you think about it, that's probably the hardest part. I don't want to undermine the challenge in beginning a faith journey, but I do want to emphasize the difficulty in staying on one. There's a song called "God on the Mountain" by Lynda Randle, and these are some of its words:

Life is easy, when you're up on the mountain
 And you've got peace of mind, like you've never known
 But things change, when you're down in the valley
 Don't lose faith, for you're never alone

For the God on the mountain, is still God in the valley
 When things go wrong, He'll make them right.
 And the God of the good times, is still God in the bad times
 The God of the day, is still God in the night

We talk of faith way up on the mountain
 But talk comes easy, when life's at its best
 Now its down in the valleys, trials and temptations
 That's where your faith is really put to the test.¹

¹ <http://www.metrolyrics.com/god-on-the-mountain-lyrics-lynda-randle.html>

Life might have been easy for the early disciples when Jesus was healing, and feeding, doing miracles and teaching. But things get harder the longer the journey goes. And when it's down the mountain, before the valley, many disciples choose to stop following. But the twelve remain because they recognize that the God of the mountain is still God in the valley. They have come to believe that Jesus who healed and taught and fed, is the Holy One of God.

The difference is in choosing to continue the journey with Christ. When times get hard we can give up, we can turn back and say this teaching is difficult and hard to accept. And even if we don't fully understand we can have faith that God of the mountain is the God of the valley. I know many of you are going through a difficult time, or that you know someone in a challenging situation, and sometimes it's hard to know what to say, it's hard to bring comfort or peace in such a painful or trying time but I hope there is some comfort in that promise.

Don't lose faith, for you're never alone. The God on the mountain, is still God in the valley. God of the good times, is still God in the bad times. The God of the day, is still God in the night.

To use the words from Ephesians, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and need. Our hope and strength doesn't come from anything that we possess, or anything here in the world, but in God. Although we have challenges, experience brokenness, and face various trials, we can pray at all times, anywhere, confident that God is with us at all times, good and bad.

Before I finish I want to point out two things. Simon Peter is the one who responds, "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." Peter has come to believe and know that Jesus is the Messiah, but Peter isn't Mr. Know-it-all...this is going to be the same guy who rejects Jesus when He says that He must be crucified and rise on the third day. Peter's faith keeps him close to Jesus when many turn back, but Peter's faith is also limited until he experiences God's grace and forgiveness after the Resurrection. The point I'm trying to make is that Peter chose to stay even though he didn't know how things would turn out. Peter continued on the faith journey, even after he denied knowing Jesus. Having faith doesn't mean that we have all the answers, it doesn't mean that we won't have our share of doubt and faltering, but it does mean having the choice to continue or turn back.

And the last thing I want to say is that Peter was just an ordinary guy. He was a fisherman. He didn't go to fancy schools, he didn't get a degree from seminary, he wasn't born into wealth or start a profitable company, he was just a regular guy, no different from you or me. What marks Peter as special isn't his intellect but his faith and his choice to continuing journeying with Jesus, when many others turned back. May we, like Peter, when faced with difficult teachings and decisions continue to follow the true Christ – not just our idea of who Jesus should be. May we follow even if others don't, assured in God's promises and presence. In the good times and the bad. Amen.