

A Deepening Faith

Joshua 24:14-18

John 6:66-69

This is the fifth and final week of a five-week series of readings walking through a single chapter in John. Jesus miraculously feeds a crowd of five thousand people; challenges them to move beyond the need for “signs and wonders”; declares, “I am the bread of life,” the one who has come to provide a feast and the nourishment of living wisdom; and points toward the Eucharist as a meal of intimate communion with God. In this week’s passage, Jesus underlines that the point of all this—from the miraculous abundance to the intimate communion—is finally to lead us toward a genuine, vibrant, courageous, true and real life of faith and service.

We might expect this culminating passage to end the chapter in triumph and illumination, with the amazed crowds lining up to join the Jesus movement. But John’s story is moving in the opposite direction. Hearing Jesus’ words, the crowds turn away, confused and disappointed, and many of Jesus’ disciples join them. The throng of five thousand now dwindles down to the original twelve. The atmosphere is at once charged with awe and overcast with dismay.

When people do leave, it hurts. People leave in John 6. Verse 66 reads, “because of this, many disciples turned back and no longer went with him.” Verse 67 asks, “do you also wish to go away?” It sounds like Jesus made some outlandish statement on the political environment today, but not so.

This is the bread of life discourse that makes them walk away. When he starts talking about what it means to be in relationship with God, that shrinks the movement. I admit the language is hard and gruesome: “those who drink my blood and eat my flesh abide in me and I in them.”

Jesus says come to me and to come to me is a life that is decidedly different than the way you have come in the past. At which point people leave. Maybe they decided to follow Jesus on the basis of successful outcomes. And looking around the small crowd it does not look like much of a success. Maybe they decided to follow Jesus on the basis of what he had done for them and their community. And this lesson on true bread has them sitting there thinking in circles when they could be feeling good about themselves or doing something different.

Jesus puts forth a difficult teaching and Joshua in Joshua 24 does the same. Joshua had led the people of Israel to the Promised Land, a place occupied by intimidating nations with high walls and attractive idols. Joshua says, “as for me and my family, we will serve the Lord.” You must also choose.

Both Jesus and Joshua make being a part of the community of faith difficult, and some say it is very hard. For us to be truly alive, we have to be in relationship with Jesus and committed to living our lives following his teachings and example even when they are difficult—because Jesus is the true source of abundant life.

These are scriptures that challenge us in our commitment in faith to God and Jesus. They are also scriptures that challenge us to explore the reality of doubt, confusion, skepticism, and distrust in the life of faith. When the disciples whisper, “This teaching is difficult,” we all can relate! The mysteries are many along the way of discipleship. This is why living a life of faith is done in community and not just on one day of intense emotion. It is lived, rather, through a lifetime of “inclining our hearts toward the Lord.” (Joshua 24:23)

On this day at the end of John 6, Jesus’ ministry was anything but over. The road felt bumpy, and the place was the opposite of packed. The disenchanting will depart—and sometimes we are the disenchanting. We have thought about walking away, or literally walked away, at some point or another.

Jesus tells us that when the teaching is difficult or the world is hard, we have the option to go deeper. Take Jesus up on the relationship, the abundant life, the commitment that has at other points along the way been declined. We think we need a miracle, but all we really need is a life committed to love, serve, and grow in ever widening circles of God’s grace.

Think about it – Pray about it – Live it

Bob