

Leave? Or Stay and Do the Hard Work of Belief

13 Pentecost B Aug 21, 2021 Rev. Dr. David Gardner Tweed

Gospel: John 6:56-69

The “hard saying” that offends Jesus’ disciples is his claim that his followers must eat his flesh and drink his blood. The followers who return to their old lives know something about how odd this sounds. Simon Peter, on the other hand, knows something about the scarcity of living, gracious words. He asks the most important question: “To whom shall we go?”

[Jesus said,] ⁵⁶“Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. ⁵⁷Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. ⁵⁸This 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.” ⁵⁹He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum. ⁶⁰When many of his disciples heard it, they said, “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?” ⁶¹But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, “Does this offend you? ⁶²Then what if you were to see the Son-of-Man ascending to where he was before? ⁶³It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. ⁶⁴But 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. ⁶⁵And he said, “For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father.” ⁶⁶Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. ⁶⁷So Jesus asked the twelve, “Do you also wish to go away?” ⁶⁸Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. ⁶⁹We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.”

Overview - Who Can Accept It?

“This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?” (John 6:60). Jesus’ teaching about eating his flesh and drinking his blood isn’t something we can figure out and accept on our own. In his explanation of the third article of the Apostles’ Creed, Martin Luther writes these often-quoted and memorized words: “I believe that by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him.” The question of accepting Jesus’ difficult teachings gets turned on its head. No one can accept it. The good news of Jesus is too radical, unsettling, and illogical for us to accept. Through the grace of God and the work of the Holy Spirit we are able to echo Peter’s profession of

faith: “You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God” (John 6:68-69). Like Peter, we have come to believe—despite our doubts and weakness of faith—through the Spirit’s work in the word.

John 6:56-69

John 6 concludes by contrasting those of Jesus’ disciples who eventually left his movement with those believers who remained. John has moved the setting from the shore of the lake (v. 25) to the synagogue (v. 59). Thus, the discourse that began as a comment on a specific miracle has been generalized to one that echoes the Christians’ late-first-century debate with Judaism. Jesus is called Son of Man, the apocalyptic judge, and the Holy One, a common designation in Hebrew for God. In John’s paradoxical fashion, verse 56 calls the food “flesh” which one must eat to live, and verse 63 says that the flesh is useless. In concluding a chapter that speaks repeatedly of eating Christ’s flesh, the fourth evangelist writes that the flesh is useless. Thus he has elaborated on a metaphor, yet then reminds the reader that it was only a metaphor. The metaphors are the vehicles that proclaim the “words of eternal life.” The gospel calls also us, along with the Twelve, to receive Christ, to live in him.

Jesus has said that he is divine and the *living bread*. Now he says that partaking in the Eucharist, the Lord’s Supper, establishes a lasting relationship, a community of life, a mutual indwelling, between him and the believer.

“Living Father” (v. 57) reminds us of “living bread” (v. 51): the Father sent the Son to give life, and the life the Son has is the Father’s, given to the Son; this type of relationship is extended to the partaker in the Eucharist. This bread is “from heaven” (v. 58) as was manna (“which your ancestors ate”), but it is much more effective: it is the eucharistic sacrament of life. Jesus now leaves the “synagogue” (v. 59). Many of his followers find “this teaching” (v. 60) “difficult”, i.e. offensive: eating flesh is repugnant; he offends Jewish belief by claiming to be “from heaven” (v. 58) and to give life (only God can do that). Jesus says (v. 62): *if you can’t accept these things, seeing me ascend to heaven will really confound you*. I speak spiritually, not literally (v. 63): “it is the spirit that gives life”, is the life-giving factor. Humanity, even Christ in human form, is “useless” without the spirit. Jesus’ words link life with spirit. Some, he says, do not believe, so the Eucharist is nonsense to them (v. 64). Belief in him is a gift from the Father (v. 65). This leads many to desert him (as later many left the Church, v. 66). Jesus offers the twelve the chance to leave him (v. 67). Peter replies on their behalf: we are on the way to knowing you, for we already believe in you; we know why you came (v. 69).

Theological Reflection

When Peter confesses that Jesus has the words of eternal life, the word translated as “eternal,” *aionios*, can also mean “the life of the age” according to N. T. Wright in *How God Became King* (New York: HarperCollins, 2012, p. 44). The emphasis in this translation focuses on the quality of life in *ha-olam ha-ba* (the coming age), rather than the chronological duration of life. For an extended quote and explanation on the use of *aionios* in John 6, visit girardianlectionary.net.

Images in the Readings

Last week the image of **flesh** was discussed. This week, John finally throws up his hands and writes, “The flesh is useless.” As Augustine said, the Scriptures are “of mountainous difficulty and enveloped in mysteries.” Peter calls Jesus “the **Holy One** of God.” In Psalm 106:16, this phrase describes the priest Aaron. In the Hebrew Scriptures, “the Holy One” is a common circumlocution for God. John’s high Christology allows him to call Jesus by this divine title. In one of the interesting parallels between Mark and John, in Mark 1:24 it is the madman who calls Jesus “the Holy One of God.”

- I. Many folks know many of the bible stories but who do you know that when you are around them it actually feels like they live those stories --- not literally, but they live out, exude, radiate the passion for the kingdom, the forgiveness of Jesus, the Love of our Heavenly Parent or the desire that all – esp. the ‘Least of These’ would be cared for and treated with respect even when we just talk about those who live in poverty or hunger? Why do you think it is SO HARD to live that way for all of us? What is so hard about believing in Jesus as God in human form and following his teachings (not as a rule to live by but an inspiration to aspire to)?
- II. Where do you see the world turning to find their version of, “the Words of Eternal Life?” From self-help to modern mysticism to the latest and greatest diet or Mindfulness program.....what do you see people are actually after in all of these programs/activities or philosophies? If finding a different quality of living is that answer then why is it so hard to see that Jesus is the One who has demonstrated that lifestyle for the whole world? Will you go.....or stay and Feast on the One who Gives himself for all of us?