

As I think back to the years when my kids were growing up, I remember late afternoons and evenings when they would sit at the kitchen table doing their homework. I would frequently sit with them as they worked, attempting to encourage them and help as necessary. I clearly remember times when they would be working on something rather challenging, when they would not quite understand how to do something, when they just seemed not to be getting it. At those times, they would often get frustrated and exclaim, “This is soooo hard!” They just wanted to give up. Well, today, we find something similar in our gospel reading. The people are gathered together, listening to Jesus as he teaches in the synagogue. And, when he is done, a bunch of his followers come to him and say, “Jesus, this teaching is soooo hard!”

This is the last week of five in which we hear about Jesus as the bread of life. Jesus has been telling the people this meal he offers them doesn't come from the fields or the sea, but from his very own body. Jesus says to them that those who eat his flesh and drink his blood will abide in him and he will abide in them, and that whoever does this will live forever. The crowd, now referred to as disciples, say to themselves, “This teaching is so difficult; it is **so hard**. Who can accept it?”

Now, it is important to understand that the English translation giving us the word “difficult,” doesn’t quite get at what the Greek word really means. In the Greek, the word means “hard”, as in solid and dense, something that would leave a bruise if it hit you in the arm. So, what the crowd is saying is that this teaching is like banging your head against a brick wall. **It’s so hard.** You can’t quite break through it. You can’t understand it. They are saying, “This is craziness! This is insane. This doesn’t make any sense.” But does Jesus slow down? Make it softer? Does he explain any of it? No. Jesus ramps the sermon up a bit, saying, “Oh, I’m sorry, does this offend you? Well, if this offends you, what if you see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. But among you, there are some who don’t believe.” I have to ask – does anyone understand what Jesus is talking about? These followers don’t. And so, not surprisingly, they leave.

Well, again, the followers who walk off on the spot are so like us. You see, when things start to lose their meaning, or you don’t really feel like you understand, it is pretty tempting to just leave, isn’t it? And, as I think about the church in today’s culture, I think we church people often speak in a language people **don’t** understand. For many people, church just doesn’t seem to make any difference. In light of all the other things

going in our culture and world that **do** impact people's lives, many today wonder why they should continue to go to church. So, they quit.

How do you respond to that? Does the church still have significance in your life? Does the church speak a language you feel you can understand, or not so much? I mean we use phrases to talk about Jesus like, "eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one being of the Father." We talk about resurrection from the dead and power through death, the Holy Spirit, forgiveness, loving your enemies, redemption and overwhelming grace. Some days, it seems like the things we say within these four walls are probably as clear as mud to many people.

When we look again at today's gospel reading, notice what Jesus does when the people leave. Nothing. He doesn't do anything. Why? Why not just try to make it easier to understand? Why doesn't Jesus give the people what they want? Isn't that what most churches would do if put in a similar situation? If people are leaving a church in droves, many churches try to spice up the worship with a guitar and drum set. Some try to make the sermons more interactive with a screen and cool videos. But Jesus... he just lets them leave, without a word. Now, I don't know about you, but there is something about this that speaks volumes about love to

me. To be given the freedom to walk away. To be given a choice. To be told, “You can stay, or you can leave. It’s up to you. I won’t force you either way.” That response just seems to display a whole lot of love.

Well, when these followers leave, we then get one of the saddest lines in all of Scripture...Jesus looks at the twelve remaining disciples, and he says, “Do you wish to go away too?” Anyone who has ever been abandoned by their friends or their colleagues, anyone who has suddenly found themselves isolated and alone, knows what Jesus might be feeling in the depth of his heart – a sense of grief and maybe even fear in this very moment. “Do you wish to go away too?” he asks his friends. Peter then responds with this beautiful line, a line that we sing every Sunday in our liturgy, just before we hear the gospel proclaimed. Peter declares, “Lord, to whom shall we go? **You** have the words of eternal life.” Yes, Peter asks, “To whom can we go?” And, the twelve disciples stay with Jesus.

Now, on the surface, this line from Peter sounds like a confident statement of faith. But, there is part of me that hears in it exhaustion as well. These disciples have left everything behind, their families and jobs and friends. And now that the crowd has left...where else are they to go? Might as well just keep following Jesus.

Now, I don't know why you are here today. But I do know this whole faith thing isn't always easy. In fact, I must honestly say that, in our present culture, there are times when this life of faith seems increasingly hard. It is a very counter-cultural way of living. At times, it can seem exhausting. At times, it can seem soooo hard.

But where else can we go? Where else can we at least join together in the struggle and contemplate the mystery of this life and the mystery of faith? And that's just it. It is something we do *together*. Notice that Peter didn't say, "Lord, to whom can I go?" No, he said, "Lord, to whom can **we** go." When Peter responds with these words, it is truly a significant point in the Gospel of John. It is the **first** time that Jesus' closest disciples are named "the twelve." Their decision **not** to turn away but to walk forward with Christ draws them together as a community of faith. It is not any particular creed, mission statement, style of worship, or service program that unites them as the body of Christ. It is their professed willingness to walk together following Jesus Christ that renders them a community of faith. You see, this life of faith is not something we do on our own. We do it together and we go together! It is something we share together as we live together in relationship. And when it is shared, we – together - make up the body of Christ.

Jesus, the true Word of God stands here in our midst, in the midst of all the challenges of life and the challenges of the living of these days, pointing us to life and life abundant. Quite honestly, running away from the challenges of life, running only to self, living for self, really leads to empty satisfaction. On the other hand, I must truthfully say this life of faith is counter-intuitive. It is counter-intuitive, because the words of eternal life which Jesus gives to us, tell us that we must die, and that is so hard. But, we must die to self and live to Christ, because it is at the foot of the cross that we gather. It is at the foot of the cross where God is faithful, where Christ is present with us, and where, by the power of the Holy Spirit, we are one in Christ.

So, in times of uncertainty and challenge, at times when we do not understand, at times when there is a temptation to leave because things seem soooo hard, may we look again to Christ and not ourselves. Like the twelve disciples, we will find there what has always been – the good news of Jesus Christ, the Holy One of God. We will find Jesus, the bread of life, the one with the words of eternal life. To whom else can we go?