

Which Direction?
John 6.56-71
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Presbyterian Church in Sudbury

Introduction to the Morning Lesson

This is our third and final sermon for awhile from John 6. I said a couple of weeks ago that this chapter contains some of the most complicated teaching in the New Testament. But the biggest complications arise not from difficulty understanding the words but from difficulty accepting and obeying what Jesus says. He teaches that he is the true bread come down from heaven and only by ingesting him into the substance of our lives can we satisfy the hunger for God that is built into every human life. That's not hard to understand but it's very hard to do. In these messages we've seen how lots of folks just wouldn't follow in the direction Jesus was leading.

How and why do some people believe and accept the gospel, while others with apparently the same intelligence and similar backgrounds want no part of it?¹ That seems to be the question underlying this chapter. Some perhaps turned away from following Jesus because they misconstrued his words when he said we must eat his flesh and drink his blood. But the real offense may be how demanding Jesus' way is. In today's text, some disciples, including Judas, turn away from Jesus' direction and others, like Peter, follow him. But when we remember that Peter was neither smarter nor more religious than other disciples, we need to reflect on our own discipleship when reading this text. Do we follow Jesus or turn in another direction? Let's read it in John 6.

John 6.56-71 (NRSV)

“Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. This 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.” He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum.

When many of his disciples heard it, they said, “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?” But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, “Does this offend you? 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 flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. But 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. And he said, “For this reason I have told you that no one can

¹ Walter Brueggemann, Charles B. Cousar, Beverly R. Gaventa, James D. Newsome, *Texts For Preaching, Year B* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1993) 481.

come to me unless it is granted by the Father.”

Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. So Jesus asked the twelve, “Do you also 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.” Jesus answered them, “Did I not choose you, the twelve? Yet one of you is a devil.” He was speaking of Judas son of Simon Iscariot, for he, though one of the twelve, was going to betray him.

Introduction

You may recall my friend and mentor, Morgan Roberts, who preached at my installation here a couple of months ago. Morgan and I served together at the First Presbyterian Church in Birmingham, Michigan. He went on from there to the Shadyside Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh and sometime later I moved to Spokane.

In a sermon he preached not long after going to Shadyside, Morgan began with an illustration about an old brick pathway in a vacant lot next to the church. That lot was owned by the church and at one point was the location of the McClintock home. That building was torn down in the early 1980s but for some reason the brick pathway was left in place. It didn’t really go anywhere but was now just a path of bricks through the pleasant grass of that empty lot surrounded by the stately trees that graced the Shadyside neighborhood.²

Morgan commented that for many people newer to the church or those who happened across that lot while shopping in Shadyside, the brick walk was a pathway to nowhere. For those who had been around the church for awhile and remembered the old McClintock home, it was a pathway to somewhere, at the very least a pathway to a certain set of memories about the way things used to be.

Now in that sermon he developed the illustration quite differently than I will. But the image has stuck in my head because it seems to be an apt metaphor for our lives. We are either on a path to nowhere or on a path to somewhere. We may not even know exactly where we are going sometimes, but the direction we head in life is very important.

Which direction we are headed seems to be at the heart of today’s text. Some disciples found Jesus’ teaching so hard that they turned back, went a different direction, and no longer went about with him. Jesus wondered if even the Twelve might turn away. But Peter, speaking for the rest and perhaps speaking somewhat reluctantly, said, “Where else can we go? We’re going to stick with you.” We are either going somewhere with Jesus or nowhere without him. Let’s ask a couple of questions about what that means.

ONE: Do we know how hard it is?

First, do we know how hard it is to follow Jesus? As we’ve seen in these sermons, Jesus’ teachings have a sharp point. He speaks literally of the need for people to eat his flesh and drink his blood and even when we get over the stumbling block of how these

² From F. Morgan Roberts, “Pathways to Somewhere,” sermon, Shadyside Presbyterian Church, 24 April 1988, cassette recording.

words offend our tastes, we encounter great difficulty in following them. I'm reminded of a church in Bayeux, France where there is a tapestry that depicts a scene in which a column of Norman soldiers is riding along. Bishop Odo, the Bishop of Bayeux, rides behind them. He is prodding the last soldier with a stout stick. The caption below this scene reads: "Bishop Odo *comforts* the soldiers."³ So Jesus' teaching "comforts" us but that comfort doesn't feel very good. Do we know how hard it is to follow him?

And let's not think that only faithless ones find it hard. One commentator says it is striking that John uses the word "disciples" for those who turn back; these are apparently not just casual listeners. In our terms, they are not the folks who show up only at Christmas and Easter. These people have been teaching Sunday school, as it were, and working on committees. When longtime pillars start leaving the church, we all get a little nervous.⁴

So a part of me wishes I could tell you what the outcome will be if you go in the direction Jesus is calling you to go. But if I make it sound easy, then I am false to the gospel. Chances are that the immediate result of more faithfully following Jesus will be a mixture of anxiety and anticipation, perhaps even a combination of fear and hope.

For example, if you decide to more faithfully follow Jesus and realize that one of the things you most need to do is get some help with your family system in which everybody in your house is feeling less and less at home, you can expect to discover some things about yourself and your family which will be both discomfoting and promising. If you are troubled with indecision and procrastination, going in Jesus' direction will require painful discipline and only later the rewards of being more decisive and prompt.⁵

To go in Jesus' direction certainly means the challenge of sailing the frail barks of our lives by a different set of stars. Steering by the stars of prejudice — race, gender, religion, politics, the kind of prejudice doesn't matter — will lead us nowhere. Crude jokes and gossip are not on Jesus' way. Material things may appear to comfort us. In fact, they bloat us and consume our energy. Better stick with Bishop Odo's or Jesus' prod. But it's very hard.

And part of what makes Jesus' direction hard is that it isn't always clear where we are going or what we should do. The road is not only hard but sometimes the way is dark. That's why I like a prayer of Thomas Merton (1915-1968), the famous monk of the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani in Trappist, Kentucky. In a book he wrote in 1958, Brother Thomas penned this prayer:

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that

³ *Pulpit Resource* 22.1 (1994): 9.

⁴ John Ortberg, "Roll Call," *The Christian Century* 120.16 (2003): 17.

⁵ Points made well by J. Harold McKeithen, "On Leaving Home," The Sermon Mall, Theological Web Publishing, LLC, webedit@theology.org.

*desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it. Therefore I will trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.*⁶

I like that prayer and pray it frequently. For the road is hard and we may not know where we are going. But if we are headed in Jesus' direction, we can know that we will not ever be alone.

TWO: Will we pay the cost?

So we also need to ask a second question. If we are going to go in the direction of Jesus, we need to ask not only if we know how hard it is. We also must ask the related question of will we pay the cost? The first question has to do with our understanding and the second concerns our willingness. Will we pay the cost?

A number of years ago before the amazing political changes that took place in South Africa, the government canceled a political rally against apartheid. In response, Desmond Tutu led a worship service in St. George's Cathedral. The walls were lined with soldiers and riot police carrying guns and bayonets, ready to close the worship down. Bishop Tutu began to speak of the evils of the apartheid system — how the rulers and authorities that propped it up were doomed to fail. He pointed a finger at the police who were there to record his words: "You may be powerful — very powerful — but you are not God. God cannot be mocked. You have already lost."

Then, in a moment of unbearable tension, the bishop seemed to soften. Coming out from behind the pulpit, he flashed that radiant Tutu smile and began to bounce up and down with glee. "Therefore, since you have already lost, we are inviting you to join the winning side." The crowd roared, the police melted away, and the people also began to dance.⁷

Jesus is inviting us to join the winning side. But we can easily forget how much courage it took Tutu to dance in the face of bayonets and how much courage it takes us to dance our faith in the face of all the things that hinder us. Too much ample evidence suggests that American Christians like their faith in low-calorie, lite portions. We don't like controversy, or politics mixed with faith, or new ideas that challenge our favorites prejudices, or things that make us uncomfortable. But all of that comes sometimes when we go in Jesus' direction. We may be on the winning side but we would rather not endanger ourselves by doing the actual fighting.

I'm sure it's a spoof but I read last week an advertisement for a low-calorie, lite approach to Christian faith. The ad said:

- Has the heaviness of your old-fashioned church got you weighted down? Try us!
- We are the New and Improved Lite Church of the Valley. Studies have shown

⁶ Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (New York: Noonday Press, 1999) 23.

⁷ Quoted from Ortberg, 17.

we have 24% fewer commitments than other churches. We guarantee to trim off guilt, because we are Low-Cal ... low Calvin, that is.

- We are the home of the 7.5% tithe. We promise 35-minute worship services, with 7-minute sermons. Next Sunday's exciting text is the story of the Feeding of the 50.
- We have only 6 Commandments — Your choice! We use just three gospels in our contemporary New Testament, "Good Sound Bites for Modern Human Beings."
- We only take the offering every other week, all major credit cards accepted, of course.
- Yes, the New and Improved Lite Church of the Valley could be just what you are looking for. We are everything you want in a church ... and less!⁸

Spooof or not, it rings too true for too many and lite faith or lite church are not what Jesus had in mind.

Wondering if they were willing to pay the cost, Jesus asked the disciples who stuck with him that most unsettling question: "Do you also wish to go away?" I wonder sometimes how I would have responded to the question. How would you respond? How *do* we respond? I wonder because, to be honest, I would rather go a different direction sometimes. I don't like thinking this about myself. But in times of temptation, in times when I deceive other people to avoid trouble, in times when I look the other way so I won't see the poor or marginalized and feel guilty or bothered to help, in times like that I would rather not go in Jesus' direction.

I think a similar reluctance is echoed in Peter's response to Jesus' question. When Jesus asked if he wanted to also go away, Peter doesn't say "yes." He also doesn't quite say "no." Peter answers Jesus with another question: "To whom can we go?" It isn't the best answer but at least it's honest. I think Peter was starting to count the cost of heading in Jesus' direction. He may have not been too excited about it but somehow he knew it was a path towards somewhere, not nowhere.

Conclusion

And so, dear friends, which direction are we headed today? Nowhere or somewhere with Jesus? I think with our best selves we all want to go somewhere with Jesus. But even when we know how hard it is and are willing to pay the cost, we need help. That's why we're here so we can all help each other.

When Thomas Wolfe, the author of *Look Homeward Angel* and *You Can't Go Home Again*, lay dying in August 1938 at the age of thirty-eight, he wrote this testimony.

Something has spoken to me in the night, and told me I shall die,
I know not where, Saying:
To lose the earth you know for greater knowing;

⁸ Aha!, online, http://www.joinhands.com/aha_online/, Internet, 24 Aug. 2003.

To lose the life you have, for greater life;
To leave the friends you love, for greater loving;
To find a home more kind than home, more large than earth –
Whereon the pillars of this earth are founded.⁹

It is our calling as disciples to find our true home in Jesus and to help each other find our true home. For only there will we be fed the true and satisfying bread come down from heaven that can satisfy our deepest hunger now and forever. May God bless along the way.

⁹ Quoted from McKeithen.