

“Do You Also Wish to Go Away?”¹

John 6:56-69

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“Do you also wish to go away?” If Jesus would ask me that question I think I’d have a little more verve than Peter. Well, yes, Jesus, I do sometimes think about going away, thank you for asking. When you talk about eating your flesh and drinking your blood, and other freaky stuff, I do think about going away. And not only that. When I see all the abuses that have happened within the church at the hands of people who claim to be closest to you – the priests who destroyed the lives of children they took vows to serve and protect, the bishops who covered it up – yeah, I think about going away. And not only that. When I have a Sunday off and do what I did last week – cut the grass at 10am on a Sunday morning – sinner that I am – read the New York Times all the way through – have a 2nd full cup of coffee – read a book – yeah, Jesus I think about going away. I think about joining the fastest growing spiritual group in America – the spiritual but not religious – where I could design my own faith with only the parts of creeds that I know and endorse which wouldn’t include talk about eating your flesh or drinking your blood.

I used to be afraid to admit just how often I’ve thought about going away until I realized that admitting that is proof that I’m actually listening to what Jesus is saying. Eat my flesh? Drink my blood? No thank you. Love my enemies? Feed the hungry with whatever I have because you say it will always be enough? Give my life to a rabbi who sounds crazy and makes me look that way, too? Try to live in a community with other people whose only credential for being there is that they can’t quit that crazy rabbi, too? Yeah, I sometimes I wish to go away.

If you haven’t had thoughts of going away I don’t think you’ve been paying attention to what Jesus is saying. I don’t necessarily mean going away from church. I know there are lots of people who love the overtly religious parts of church – the beauty of the liturgy, the order of the rules, the safety of a sanctuary. Some of us fall in love with religion early and we cling to it later in life. But Jesus isn’t promoting religion. He’s inviting us to abide in God, and God to abide in us. That’s what he’s saying here. He’s not about religion, per se. He’s about breaking the chasm between heaven and earth, spiritual and material, sacred and secular, human & divine. And most of us can’t handle that.

We can’t handle this incarnational God who meddles too deep in our business. Religion – that system of rules, doctrines, dogmas, behaviors - that can be handled, managed, rejected, or adopted by us. But God-in-the-flesh who abides in us? That’s too much for a lot of people. I’d say it’s too much for normal people. Plenty complain, turn around and leave – not just the crowds, according to John, but Jesus’ disciples – Jesus’ closest followers. People like me. So having turned a lot of

¹ This sermon was heavily influenced by the Rev. Elizabeth Cole Goodrich’s paper on John 6 presented to The Well preaching group in April of 2018.

people away Jesus now turns to the twelve closest to him and asks the question, “Do you also wish to go away?” And that’s a question I wrestle with all the time.

When the world’s on fire and the church can’t bring healing because it’s too timid to speak truth to power, or it’s too compromised by its own sins, or it’s too in love with it’s own history to be present to what God is doing right now, yeah then I think about going away. When there’s a hunger in the nation for a world that defined by something other than outrage or resentment and the church doesn’t seem to have bread that satisfies that need because we’re just as divided, or just as racist, or just as shrill, or just as partisan, yeah I think about going away. When Jesus agitates me at precisely the time I’m getting comfortable, or calls for my compassion just when my self-righteous anger is warming me up, or calls out my own hypocrisy – I think about going away. Or when we get more agitated in the church by the length of our worship service, or the color of the paraments than by the pain of the poor, or we just don’t behave well with others when we know better, then yeah, I think about going away.

Because, just like in the text, it’s the enfleshed parts of the faith that make it the hardest. It’s not the doctrines- not wrestling with those hard teachings as disembodied ideas. It’s the people. The ones who have eaten the same bread and partaken of the same cup, but who do not, it seems, often see the same Lord I do behind the table. The Catholic parishioners to whom I want to scream rise up and take over your leadership and rewrite the script. The white evangelicals to whom I want to rage do you realize that the most consistent thing you’ve held in common over the last 50 years is not your beliefs or doctrines – it is your whiteness?² The activist Christians that frustrate me by their readiness to be judged only by their activity and not by their outcomes. And even some of you who irritate me when you just don’t seem to do what I think you should do or think the way I think you should think. And I know I irritate you too.

It’s the enfleshed parts of faith that make it the hardest and there’s no way around that incarnational reality with Jesus. It’s at the center of the Gospel. The God who comes not as some abstract spirit but as a human being who rips the bandaids off of our privileged complacency, tells us things we don’t understand or don’t want to understand, calls us away from what’s comfortable and easy and safe – disrupts everything. It’s no wonder we think about going away.

But maybe that’s where Peter gives us something better than commiseration that I was looking for at the beginning. We already know that Peter has considered leaving. His response to Jesus is built on the assumption that he’s considered that option.

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. It’s a confession of faith. A surrender to the mystery. It’s not that he hasn’t thought about other options- he clearly has. But because of what he has seen, because of what he has come to believe and to know, he’s bound to stay. He will stick with Jesus and all the crap that

² “American Evangelicalism and the Politics of Whiteness,” Seth Dowland, June 19, 2018, <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/critical-essay/american-evangelicalism-and-politics-whiteness>.

comes with him... because the alternatives, as enticing as they are, don't bear the weight of the glory of God.

Because religious rules, or systems, or practices - they're just not as interesting or as wiley or as maddening or as transforming as this human/divine Jew out of Galilee. As much as I bristled with you at the call to worship's claim that "One day spent in your house, this beautiful place of worship, beats thousands spent on Greek island beaches" the truth is I'd get restless on a Greek island beach after a month or so because that dang Rabbi's voice would be whispering to me blessed are the poor for theirs is the reign of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. I'd still hear his voice asking, "What does it profit a person if she gains the whole world but loses herself?"

And maybe that's what this abide-in-God/God-abide-in-me-rabbi does to you. This sacramental God whose bread and wine and water and words filter into your bones, splices down in your DNA, changes your core. Maybe that's what Jesus is trying to say about eating his flesh and drinking his blood. He gets in there so deep that you can't really decide whether his flesh and blood self has turned into you or whether you've just become a little more like him. The Word grinds into your soul so deep that you can't be satisfied with accepting our racially segregated city even if you don't know exactly how to change it; you refuse to accept white supremacy whether it comes from the streets of Charlottesville or the oval office; you can't bear to be satisfied with an ethic of outrage or resentment that doesn't include compassion, forgiveness and the possibility of reconciliation; you can't buy into our culture's central theological conviction that peace and prosperity come through purchasing. That God-in-the-flesh rabbi gets in there so deep that each time you hear Jesus announcing abundant life, refusing to dodge suffering and death, pointing to the creative power of God for life, fear seems to fade away and death doesn't seem all that relevant anymore.

And where else can you go once you've had a taste of that kind of God? Once you've caught a glimpse of what's possible and not just what is? Once you know that Jesus is offering a kind of life that you're not going to find in the philosophies of Karl Marx or Adam Smith; once this rabbi has scratched an itch that the glossy catalogs can't touch, once this God has fed a hunger that the drugs cannot satisfy; once this Lord has made it clear that the love-filled-life that he's offered is eternal - it's sustained beyond what we can see or understand; where else can you go but to join your voice with others whose only credential for being here is that they can't quit that crazy rabbi, too?

I keep looking - it could just be a vocational hazard. That story about the old bishop told the truth when he it's said that he whispered into the ears of the newly ordained, "Remember, God doesn't trust you enough to be a layperson."³ But I've been around enough to know there are plenty more than the clergy who think about giving up on Jesus' Way. His closest followers always seem to - because it's hard to put up this rabbi and the people he gathers around him. The teachings are hard, the

³ Heard from a friend attributes this story to Craig Barnes.

call is persistent even when you glimpse the justice that comes rolling down every now and then along the Way. I keep looking – maybe I always will.

But in the meantime I keep taking his bread and his wine, I keep dipping my hand in those waters that remind me of whose I am, I keep returning to his words about forgiveness and grace and hope and peace and generosity because I believe him or want to. I keep giving him my prayers, calling on him in my need, thanking him for too many gifts that I don't deserve. I keep following him or trying to with courage that comes from some other place.

What about you?