

Epworth Chapel on the Green
August 23, 2009
Pentecost 12
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Joshua 24:1-25
Psalm 16
Ephesians 5:21-33
John 6:60-69

For the past several weeks, our Gospel lessons have come from John chapter six, where Jesus has repeatedly said to his hearers (and to us): “I am the bread of life. I am the One sent by the Father to give you eternal life. Nothing else satisfies. Eat and drink of me, and you will live.”

Throughout John’s Gospel Jesus has been revealing *who* he is, and *what* he offers to people. He is the true bread from heaven, the true revelation of God, and he offers people relationship with God that is truly life-changing.

Jesus has come among the people as God incarnate. God has arrived in their midst wearing a human face. Jesus has offered them the very life of God, and has asked them to believe. He has set the table in their midst and invited them to come and eat.

Unfortunately, though, Jesus’ message is (literally) too much for some to swallow. The message -- and the messenger -- are rejected, ostensibly on intellectual grounds. The content of the message is hard to understand. It runs counter to reason. It is intellectually implausible. What Jesus says stretches the limits of credibility and credulity.

We need not look far in our world today to hear outspoken critics of Christianity proclaiming the same message.

But Jesus' words here are interesting to me. There's no question that Jesus' teachings are challenging and difficult, but I get the sense from Jesus here that those difficulties are not insurmountable, and in fact are not the real issue.

Jesus says in verse 63: "the Spirit gives eternal life. Human effort accomplishes nothing. And the very words I have spoken to you are spirit and life. But some of you don't believe me."

I have a theory. I wonder if the biggest obstacles to faith in Jesus are not intellectual, but *moral* obstacles? What if the real problem is not that Christianity is intellectually implausible, but that our pride wants a relationship with God on *our* terms and according to our mental paradigms? What if our problem is not intellectual, but rather the fact that we can't accept that true life comes to us as a *gift* and is not something we can control or coerce?

The real obstacle to Christianity is not that it's intellectually implausible but that it's intellectually *scandalous*, because it causes us to confront face to face Jesus' claim of *who* he was and *what* he came to offer persons. And the scandal of the Gospel is that Jesus did not come to offer us a bullet list of 10 things to do to be happy and healthy, but instead came to invite people into a relationship with God

that is an open-ended, one-day-at-a-time proposition that involves complete trust in God's power and very little in our own.

That's a lot to swallow. Too much for some. And so both the message and the messenger are rejected.

But there is another sense in which Jesus' message is too much for some to swallow. For some, the problem is not that following Jesus is intellectually implausible -- the problem is that the *cost* of doing so is simply too high.

This is what's happening near the end of the text. After Jesus reminds his disciples that they can't come to him unless the Father draws them, the text tells us that many "turned away and deserted him." The cost of the relationship is just too high.

Jesus then turns to the twelve and asks: "What about you guys? Are you going to leave, too?"

I very much like Peter's response to Jesus, primarily because I identify with it so much. Peter says, "Lord, to whom would we go? You alone have the words of eternal life?"

On the surface, this seems an innocent response, perhaps even an affirmation. But this is not exactly a ringing endorsement. Peter says what every one of us has said at some point in our lives when we *know* what the right thing is

and yet we are unsure we want to do it because of what it's going to cost us. Peter says, "Lord, where else can we go? What other option do we have?"

It's as if Peter says, "Lord, we know you are right, but does this have to be so hard? "We know you are the one sent from God to bring us life, but the way you're going about it is enough to drive us all crazy!"

Lord, where else can we go? What other options do we have?

If you haven't asked that question at some point in your life of faith, you're either very mature, or you're sleepwalking.

Several years ago I stood one afternoon in front of the mirror in the bathroom of our tiny apartment in a Toronto high-rise. I looked in that mirror and saw an angry, hurt young man. I had just suffered a major setback in my life. I had failed to complete my thesis on time. My whole life would now be delayed for a year, and all plans Connie and I had made would be put on hold.

With tears streaming down my face I shouted at that mirror, "I quit! I've worked and I've tried, and I can't take it anymore. To hell with it all. I QUIT!"

As I stood there bawling, I heard this little voice in my head that said, "so what are you going to do if you quit?"

I knew that quitting was not an option. Where would I go? What would I do? Sitting there on that bathroom floor in tears, I knew that God's plan was the

best plan. But I sure didn't understand it, and I would have been thrilled to have another option. In that moment, I knew a little how Peter felt.

And so do you. Each of us, as we follow Jesus, arrives eventually at a place where your relationship with Jesus comes with a steep price tag, and where loyalty to that relationship is costly.

In those moments, we are prone to cry out, "Lord, I know there really are no other options, but just in case, are there any other options?"

We know the answer to that, of course. But that doesn't make us immune to sitting on a bathroom floor with tears in our eyes.

As we come to the table this morning, it may be that some of you here this morning find yourselves residing temporarily at this particular address in John's Gospel. You may be hurting, struggling with the high cost associated with walking with Jesus. And you may be hearing the question that Peter and the others heard: "what about you?"

I don't have any easy answers to offer you this morning. I do have another theory, however. My theory is this: whatever price you may be called upon to pay in order to walk with Jesus -- it's worth paying. Whatever struggle may confront you on the path -- it's worth struggling for. For ultimately, the struggle is not *our* struggle; it's God's.

So come this morning with faith. Receive the grace that strengthens you for the journey. And choose again in this moment to follow him -- wherever that may lead.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.