

## **Questions from John for Lent and Easter: The Discipleship Question: Do You Want to Leave?” John 6:60-71**

We continue our investigation of questions Jesus asked of various people in the Gospel of the Apostle John.

A bit of context is needed to appreciate this question which Jesus asks of His inner circle, the Twelve Disciples. There were three groups of people, and a possible fourth, who followed Jesus. The first was the inner group, the Twelve Disciples whom Jesus specifically called to follow Him. They saw the most of Jesus' ministry, they heard the most of what He said, they received personal tutoring from Jesus as He prepared them to lead the Church that would be created after His death, resurrection, and ascension. Of course, one of them was a stinker. Judas Iscariot would betray Jesus to His enemies, an act that, two thousand years later, still boggles the mind.

Then there was larger group of followers. These were loyal to Jesus and included the group of women who helped fund Jesus' ministry.

Then there was an even larger group who followed Jesus because they heard something different in what He said, or because He did miracles, or because He distributed miraculous food, or because they wanted healing for themselves or for someone they cared about.

The fourth group was composed of His enemies. They did not follow Jesus in the same sense as the other three groups did. They followed Jesus, true, but it was to spy on Him, to try to find something in His words or actions they could use against Him, and to pose carefully crafted questions to Him which, when He answered them, they hoped would get Him in trouble with the Romans or undermine His appeal to His followers.

As this text displays, they needn't have bothered. First, because Jesus effectively defeated them each time they confronted Him; second, because the very nature of Jesus' message would ensure that Jesus following would shrink without their intervention.

Jesus is saying some hard things. They were truthful things, but they were hard things to hear. They were hard to hear because they were hard to understand. And they were hard to hear because of the kind of life He was calling His followers to observe.

In John's Gospel Jesus makes seven "I Am" statements which are very similar in construction to one another, in which He declares Himself to be something. Here He makes the first: "I am the Bread of life."

Bread was a staple item of the Jewish diet in the First Century. Most of Jesus' followers were poor people. There was no guarantee for them that they would have three meals each day. But one thing was pretty predictable: if you had a meal, it would include bread and maybe fish. Bread was a symbol in Scripture of that which sustained life.

We who have grown up in the Church have heard the term, perhaps many times. But imagine how it must have fallen on the ears of those first people to hear it. What must they have thought?

Jesus explains what He means. He is as necessary to eternal life as bread made from wheat is to physical life. The people of the time could not have conceived of living without bread; to them no bread meant starvation. So Jesus tries to convey to them that the same is true of Him and eternal life. No Jesus, no eternal life.

Remember they didn't have all the history and context we have to understand this text. They did not know that Jesus was God in human form; they didn't know that He would die on the cross to satisfy the demands of His Law, to take the punishment that we all deserved and to die in our place; they didn't know He would rise from the dead. So His words were hard to them – hard to understand and, therefore, hard to accept.

Then He tells them not only is He the “bread of life” but that He has “come down from heaven.” This really gets them confused and, in some cases, riled up. His true followers are scratching their heads wondering what He's talking about, trying to make sense of it. The hangers-on who are opposed to Him and His teaching have seized on His claim to have come down from heaven and they're angry, wondering who He thinks He is. This is compounded by the fact that some of them know Him from Nazareth. They know Him as the son of Mary and Joseph, so how, they ask, could He have come down from heaven?

Hard to understand; harder to accept.

He explains to them that no one can come to Him unless the Father has called them. Many today are deluded, thinking that a person can come to God anytime at all. It is true that God is open to any who come to Him and will never turn away anyone who comes to Him in faith, but it is equally true that faith is not an intellectual achievement of any person. No one decides on their own that Jesus is worth believing in. That only comes from the working of the Holy Spirit in a person's heart. As Luther wrote in the meaning of the Third Article of the Apostles Creed:

“I believe that I cannot, by my own reason or strength, believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him, but the Holy Spirit as called me by the Gospel....even as He calls the whole Christian Church on earth.” This is what Jesus means when He says that “No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him.”

Hard to understand; hard to accept.

Then He digs Himself in deeper by comparing Himself to the manna which God gave through Moses to the people of Israel in the desert 1400 years earlier. Among these people if you invoke the name of Moses you better be prepared to explain yourself. In their eyes,

Moses was the greatest. To compare yourself in any way to Him was to tread on thin ice.

Hard to understand; harder to accept.

Then Jesus administers the coup de'grace. He tells them that unless they eat of His flesh and drink of His blood they will have no life within them.

They must have wondered, "What could He possibly be talking about?" They are quite naturally thinking in physical terms: that Jesus physical flesh is some kind of bread and that His followers must eat His flesh and drink His blood, a concept that would be completely repulsive to the Jews, who were forbidden to consume blood at any time.

Hard to understand; hard to accept.

While it is almost overwhelmingly tempting to make a correspondence between Jesus' comments about bread and wine and Body and Blood and the Sacrament of Holy Communion, most commentators think His point is really that to receive what Jesus offers, forgiveness and eternal life, a person must make Jesus a part of their life in the same way that if one wants to physically live they

must make food a part of their life. As a person who rejects food will soon die, so a person who rejects Jesus will die spiritually. Jesus is telling them to simple truth: unless a person makes Jesus as much a part of their life as food, unless Jesus is as basic to their life as consuming food, they cannot inherit eternal life. He is as basic to salvation as food is to the health of the body.

Hard to understand and hard to accept.

Even Jesus' disciples acknowledge the difficulty of what He has said. They reply: "This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?"

Jesus tried to impress upon them the importance of accepting what He is saying. In effect, He says, "This is a life and death matter, and what I'm telling You is life."

And many of Jesus' followers leave. They simply decide that the cost of following Jesus is too high. They cannot accept what He is saying and so they walk away. The Great Giver of the greatest of gifts holds it out to them, and they simply walk away. They leave.

And so Jesus turns to His trusted inner circle, the Twelve. I suppose Jesus' words to them, the Twelve,

could be read in several ways, but I hear in them a profound sadness: “You do not want to leave, too, do you?”

It must have been beyond sad for the Savior to see so many walking away from the eternal life He came to purchase for them with His death and resurrection.

So, Peter’s answer must have gladdened His heart: “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that You are the Holy One of God.”

Peter’s answer is as simple as it is honest. “Your Words,” he seems to be saying, “are hard; they’re difficult to understand and even more difficult to accept. But what choice do we have? We know that You are speaking the truth. As difficult as it may be, as much as it may change our lives, we recognize the truth. And we know that You are the only way to heaven.”

I recently had a conversation with someone about the D-day invasion of Europe during World War II. They told me that the men of the 29<sup>th</sup> Division were chosen to lead the assault on one of the beaches. They knew that they were, essentially, being chosen to be expendable;

they knew that their chance of survival was pretty slim. I'm pretty certain they didn't have much understanding of Eisenhower's overall campaign strategy. Hard things to hear; hard to accept. Yet they did accept their assignment. Apparently, they understood the importance of this invasion and they accepted the task they were given. It was hard, but they accepted it.

In a sense, nothing has changed, except that we know more of God's strategy of salvation than the disciples did two thousand years ago. We're blessed with knowing that He died for us, in our place, that He took upon Himself our sin, punishment, and death and that He rose triumphant over death. We know that salvation is a free gift of God's grace through faith in Jesus.

We have more understanding than did the people of Jesus' time, even the Twelve. But it is still true that the life Jesus calls us to is not an easy one. It is a calling to be different, to be apart from the rest of the world, to live a life that is markedly and noticeably different from those around us.

It means being held to a higher standard of living, to a way of life that, in some ways, is drastically different in

its fundamentals from the way of life of our neighbors, co-workers, and friends, a way of life that will seem odd, incomprehensible to them.

We are called to love even our enemies. We are called to give to others beyond what most people would consider reasonable. We are called to put the needs of others ahead of even our own. We are called to demonstrate an honesty and integrity in our work and our dealings with others that most would find unreasonable. We are called to exert a discipline over our thoughts, words, and actions that many would believe impossible (and it is!). We are asked to live the same kind of self-sacrificial life that our Savior lived.

Not hard to understand, but hard to accept.

It's a daily decision. Each day Jesus asks of us: "Do you want to leave, too?"

And, to be quite honest, there may be days when we will be tempted to say, "Yes, I think I want to. I don't think I'm up to this. I don't think I have the strength or the commitment to do this. It's too hard."

To which Jesus would reply, “You’re right. You don’t have the strength or the commitment. It is too hard for you. But I have strength and commitment enough for both of us; it is not too hard for Me. And I live within You. You are My child and I love You. And if You continue to trust in Me, as eleven of those Twelve did, I will give you what you need. I will be Your strength and Your commitment. I won’t tell you it will be easy. But when You fail, I will forgive You. And when you fall I will pick you up. I will walk before you and behind you and above you and beneath you. Just trust in me. And I will bring you through this life and into eternity. And that, I promise You, will not be hard. That will not be difficult to accept.”

A daily choice for every follower of Jesus. A daily challenge to walk in the difficult, challenging path He plots for us. The certainty that we will never walk that path alone. The ironclad promise that that path leads to heaven.

Do you want to leave?