

1 Kings 8:[1, 6, 10-11], 22-30, 41-43

Psalm 84

Ephesians 6:10-20

John 6:56-69

At one time or another in our lives, all of us have been tempted to walk away. Sometimes walking away is the best course of action. Sometimes walking away is the prudent and self-preserving thing to do. And sometimes walking away is just the only way we know to escape from whatever difficulty or life transition has landed in our lives. It's easier to walk away than to deal with all the conflicting and confusing emotions that we might have. When we're confused or overwhelmed, the quickest way out is just to walk away. And sometimes that's the right answer. At other times, it means we miss a golden opportunity to grow and stretch as never before.

We have come to the last passage in the sixth chapter of John that makes up what's known as the Bread Discourse. Over five Sundays we have looked at Jesus as the Bread of Life in multiple ways. It all started with the Feeding of the 5,000 and the Sermon of Beatitudes on the slopes of a mountain that Jesus had originally climbed in order to get away from the crowds...in order to walk away and spend some time in solitude with God. But the crowds followed him and they were hungry...on every level, so Jesus fed them...body and soul. The bread and fish that he blessed and broke and gave to them filled their bellies. And the long list the circumstances and the personal qualities of those who are blessed lifted their spirits. The crowd was so energized and impassioned by what Jesus said and did, they tried to seize him to make him their king. But Jesus walked away. He withdrew from them and went to the top of the mountain.

The next day the crowds were looking for him again, but he had returned to his home base in Capernaum on the other side of the Sea of Galilee. The crowds eventually found him there and they were asking for more bread. Jesus confronts them. They weren't looking for Jesus because they had come to believe in the sign of the feeding of the 5,000. They were looking for him because they wanted more actual bread to eat. Jesus scolds them and tells them not to work for bread that perishes, but for the food that lasts for eternal life which the Son of Man will give them. They immediately want to know what they have to do to get it. Jesus identifies himself as the bread of life and he tells them that the work they need to do is to believe in him whom God sent. Jesus promises that anyone who comes to him will never be hungry and anyone who believes in him will never be thirsty.

Jesus' announcement is met with lots of grumbling and criticism, but Jesus tells them to stop because no one is going to come to Jesus unless the Father has drawn them to Jesus. He tells them again that he is the bread of life and this is the bread that came down from heaven so that one may eat of it and not die. And then he tells them, "The bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."

The grumbling and the complaining continue and so does Jesus. He tells them point blank that unless they eat his flesh and drink his blood they have no life in them. He says this in five different statements...one right after the other...each with a different qualifier. The repetition is not lost on us...nor on them. Just in case you missed it the first time...Jesus is going to repeat this information five more times. Jesus is so specific and so graphic that we can't gloss over any of it.

And in this last section of the Discourse on the Bread of Life, Jesus says all of these things again...and this time he says them in the confines of the synagogue in Capernaum. The people listening to these words squirmed in their seats and murmured among themselves. What can Jesus possibly be talking about? Surely he doesn't mean what he's saying. They were offended and all of us can understand why they might be. Jesus asks them, "If you saw me coming down from heaven, would you feel differently about all this?" Would you know then that I am the bread of heaven sent by God, just as God sent manna in the wilderness to your ancestors? The difference isn't that you aren't in the wilderness. You are. The difference is, your ancestors died. But the bread I give you will give you life eternal that begins right now in this life.

Most of those listening were offended and they walked away. In the Gospel of Matthew, Chapter 11, when John the Baptist has been imprisoned and wants to know if Jesus is the Messiah they have all been waiting for, Jesus answers him by saying to his disciples, "Go and tell John all that you have seen and heard; about the blind receiving sight and the lame can walk and the lepers are healed. And blessed is anyone who take no offense at me." Jesus knows that many people will.

Jesus has given his followers a command that many of them not only find difficult, but impossible to follow. His command to eat his flesh and drink his blood is one step too far for many people. Jesus has crossed a line that most will not cross with him. This commandment has shrunk a following of 5,000 or more down to less than 50. So many of them walk away. Apparently, Jesus is not too concerned with numbers...with Average Sunday Attendance. It doesn't seem to bother him that he's left with only a handful of faithful followers. That's enough for Jesus.

And he knows they are confused and troubled, so he asks them, too, “Do you want to leave?” Peter speaks for the remaining 12 when he says, “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.” These 12 are now referred to as ‘The Twelve’ for the first time. This is the core group. This is the group that has gone “all in” and closed every other door that might have given them an option to get out. They are confused certainly by Jesus’ words, but they have also come to trust him.

For those who have taken Jesus’ words literally, there is also confusion without the hope that God has provided for The Twelve. Even though one will ultimately betray Jesus, they are ‘all in.’

Jesus knows of course that he will die on the cross...that his flesh and blood will be broken and spilled for humanity. He also knows that he will be resurrected...that his body will be transformed into a spiritual body that is one that makes him recognizable to those who love and follow him. It is easy to gloss over his statement in this passage, “It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless.” When he gives his command, he is talking about ingesting the spirit that gives life...not the flesh of a resuscitated corpse. Jesus has beckoned all who believe in him to do as he commands so that they can *abide* in him and he can *abide* in them.

Jesus is offering us a kind of intimacy that we’ve never known before. The promise of life eternal is what all of us dream about, but it’s also a little scary. Jesus not only wants to be close to us, he wants to abide within us. He not only wants us to come to him, he wants us to abide in him. Such an invitation is unique and life-saving. He is offering us the kind of relationship that he has with the Father...the whom he calls Abba or Daddy. And so we find ourselves once again in one of those difficult situations where we have a choice: we can walk away or we can hang on and dig deeper. When we look back over the difficult times in our lives when we chose to hang in rather than walk away, we can see that those decisions changed us in profound ways. We are who we are because of what we learned, what we survived, and what we accomplished when we realized we had no place else to go, so we dug in.

The disenchanted walked away. Sometimes we are the disenchanted. At one point or another each of us has walked away. The one thing that we should always remember is, like the prodigal son, the Father...Abba...always welcomes us back with open arms. When the road gets hard, we’re presented with an invitation to go deeper...to claim more for ourselves. We don’t have to walk away. We can accept the invitation.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.