

August 23, 2015  
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John 6:52-69

### **Abiding Acclamation**

Jesus has been talking about bread for a long time. It's a long gospel reading today, from a long speech from John 6, the Bread of Life speech, from which we've been hearing the gospel reading, repeatedly, every week for the last five weeks. It's a long time to spend in one chapter, and a lot of repetition, and I wondered about it amongst pastor colleagues. One joked that we should just preach the same sermon five weeks in a row, and see if anyone notices. (You would all notice.) Another suggested that what Jesus says is just that difficult, that hard to understand, hard to accept, that it needs to be repeated, again and again.

It is difficult, as is said in the reading itself by the people listening to Jesus. He's been talking about bread, about how he is bread, living bread, about how eating this bread helps us abide in him, and he in us. "This teaching is difficult," some say, "who can accept it?" Facing that difficulty, many of them turn away, no longer remain with, abide with, Jesus.

It's not the first time in the Bread of Life speech that concerns have been raised. Throughout the course of this long speech, questions have been posed, complaints aired, about what Jesus is saying, the sign he is giving, the bread he is offering, just who he is. As the gospel writer John describes it, the group raising these questions are called "The Jews." In John's gospel especially, the people who are in opposition to Jesus are often referred to as "The Jews." Having noted that, it's important to note also that in the world of this gospel story, "the Jews" are not a different group of people. In this story, everyone is a Jew. It's important to note that, because the repeated use of the collective, "The Jews," in the context of opposition can give it a negative connotation—or at least, that's been the sad interpretation. There's a long, sad history between the writing of this text and now. World history, World War II and the Holocaust, and church history, centuries of anti-Semitic attitudes by Christians, including by Martin Luther, should make us pause, should make us ponder, should make us confess our sinful ways, lament how we take difficult teaching and makes someone else a problem.

What Jesus is saying is difficult for the people listening, the Jews. It's difficult for the Jews who are especially close to Jesus, his disciples, the ones who say, "This teaching is difficult." Some hear the difficulty and turn away, no longer remain with him. What Jesus is saying is difficult for the people listening, any- and every-body listening, then, and now. What does it even mean? There's all this talk about eating his flesh, and drinking his blood. It's difficult to hear it and not think of cannibals, or vampires. And then, there's all these claims about who Jesus is, and where he comes from. It's not just the meal, it's the human who says he comes from above, is one with God, that's difficult, difficult to comprehend, that flesh could be divine, that God put on a body, that's one of the most difficult teachings, then and now.

"And what about you?" Jesus says, to those still with him in the story—and to us, we too are the ones listening to the story, we too are addressed. We can recognize our own difficulty with this teaching, and we can recognize that Jesus is also posing the question to us: "Do you also wish to go away?"

As we identify with the difficulty, so also we can identify with Peter's response. You know Peter's response. In church tradition it's been set to music, (hmmm). We stand up and sing it, every Sunday, just before the reading of the gospel. The official, liturgical term for that part of the service is the "Gospel Acclamation." The lyricism of the melody, the movement, the standing, all as a group together, all add a beauty and a gravity to the moment. Peter's response,

becomes our response, our way of getting ready for the reading of whatever gospel passage is appointed for that week. We all stand up and sing what Peter says as a way of welcoming, accepting the good news of the gospel; an act of acclamation that is one of the high points of worship.

Although... as another pastor has pointed out, when you read what Peter says, it's not exactly as if, question posed, Peter stands up and recites the Apostles' Creed. What Peter says could almost come out as, "Where else we can we go?"

Perhaps he said it like that, though Peter has never struck me as particularly sardonic—which is not to say that would make it less significant. I think of the times I've heard people say similar things. Maybe they lead a Scout troop, or volunteer at a food pantry, coach a sport, teach Sunday School, they commit all kinds of time and energy to this thing, and you ask them, why do you do that? And they'll say: "What else am I going to do?" Or, sometimes, people will say things like that about very difficult situations. Perhaps a loved one—a spouse, or a child—is very sick, or requires special care, ongoing and time consuming, emotionally taxing. It's not an easy situation, but they give themselves to it. You ask them about it and they say, "What else am I going to do?"

Maybe what Peter says does not outline all the specific and complicated elements of Christian faith. Maybe it includes a sense of "what else can we do?"—which may be sardonic but is also deeply true. What else would you do with your life, but follow the one who is life? Together we repeat what Peter says, because it prepares us to receive the gospel, this teaching, in all its difficulty. We prepare for the gospel, we come to accept it, like Peter, no so much by saying something, as by doing something: standing up with, abiding in Jesus. What Peter says is a simple claim. He will stay with Jesus, the one who has the words of life. We say that, sing that, repeat that, too, every Sunday, not just Bread of Life Sundays.

Perhaps that's why Jesus talks about himself so much in terms of eating, because of the repetition of it, the repetition of eating itself. Eating is not something we can do just once, not even just once a day, it's an activity that is repeated. To live, you need to eat, again and again. So also, for our relationship with God to have life, it needs to be something we engage in regularly, talk to God repeatedly, as the reading from Ephesians says, at all times. Come to worship, regularly, read the Bible. We're not going to understand it if we hear it only one time, maybe not even five times. We need to hear it again, and again. You know how important repetition is, how many times you need to tell a child to do something, before it finally clicks, how for people of every age, messages, announcements, don't get through, unless we repeat them, again and again.

God repeats to us, again and again, a teaching that we find difficult to accept, it is a teaching that is embodied by Jesus, it is this: You are forgiven. You are loved. You are fed. We need to hear that, again and again, because it is so difficult to accept. It is difficult to accept that astonishing declaration of grace: that no matter who are, or what you've done, or what others say about you, or what you say about yourself, you are forgiven, you are loved, you are fed. God says that to us, again and again. We come here to hear that, that our whole lives may sing in response: (hmmm) Lord to whom shall we go, You have the words of eternal life. Alleluia. Alleluia.