“Choices”

Rev. Debra McGuire

Bethany Presbyterian Church

John 6:56-69

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***56Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. 57Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. 58This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever.” 59He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum.***

***60When many of his disciples heard it, they said, “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?” 61But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, “Does this offend you? 62Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? 63It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. 64But among you there are some who do not believe.” For Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe, and who was the one that would betray him. 65And he said, “For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father.”***

***66Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. 67So Jesus asked the twelve, “Do you also wish to go away?” 68Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. 69We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.”***

Early in this sixth chapter of the Gospel of John, Jesus was able to feed 5,000 people from just a few loaves of bread. Afterward, Jesus went away from them because they wanted to take him by force and make him their king. The crowd did find him again and Jesus tried to tell them that their love of him was really stemming from the combination of witnessing a miracle and having full stomachs. He said to them then,  “Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. 27Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you.” These past four weeks of scripture have been Jesus’ commentary about his version of bread. There is no easy way to say “I am the bread of life,” and have it make any sense. Jesus has compared himself to the manna that came down from heaven when the Israelites were in the desert. Jesus too has come down from heaven, sent by God, and will feed and nourish and sustain them. Specifically, Jesus’ body, his life, his flesh and blood, are what will feed and nourish and sustain us, not just for life, but will bring us eternal life.

Jesus’ words have been more and more confusing and mysterious through all of this. At every question, Jesus seems to *start* to talk in ways we humans can understand but then soon adds something that seems *impossible* for humans. Last week especially, seemed the strangest, offering us language of actually eating his body and drinking his blood. All along, the more of an explanation Jesus seems to offer, the less people seem to be following him. From the crowd of 5,000 to just the Jews in the area, to now only the people in the temple, we see that Jesus’ words are not helping him gain followers. Eventually it was only the disciples in Jesus’ presence, and even they said to him, “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?”

I can imagine that those who were still willing to understand what Jesus was saying were struggling. Do you ever hear something or read something and think to yourself, I know what the individual words mean, but I don’t understand what is being said. Jesus tries to help them hear again, that he is inviting them to a deeper understanding of the concept of being with Jesus, the concept of abiding with him. He’s asking them to think beyond the literal into a deeper spiritual understanding of being with him, with God, of eating and being nourished and sustained. Just as Jesus joined flesh and blood to reference life, he now joins flesh and spirit to reference life with Christ. While they have been asking for concrete instructions and ideas, Jesus only offers mystery. Jesus wants the disciples and us to think *beyond* concrete. Think about more than just the flesh and blood of a body. Flesh itself is useless.

It is the Spirit that gives life. Jesus’ words are spirit and life. If we take in Jesus, take him in just like we do with any other physical nourishment, we will have Jesus’ spirit and life within us. Jesus knew that there were some who did not believe just as some had already turned back and no longer went about with him. From the 5,000 to a smaller crowd of Jews, to a smaller group in the temple, to a smaller group of his disciples, Jesus explanations and mystery were leaving more and more people behind for lack of understanding. Maybe some were just thrilled with the romance of the original miracle on that hillside. And others were curious but decided not to wonder anymore. And then there were the temple rules and seeming impossibility of doing what Jesus was asking. There were lots of reasons to not follow Jesus anymore at that point. So finally, with just the Twelve with him, he asks, “Do you also wish to go away?”

Has Jesus ever asked you that? Remember when Peter, having just promised to stay with Jesus forever, denies three times that he even knew Jesus? That was Peter going away. For Peter, his promise was real, but the immediate threat of the moment made him deny that he knew Christ, three times.

Does your faith ever ask more of you than you can bear? You feel God calling you to answer a certain way, do a certain thing, make a certain choice – and it’s just too much. Your circumstances make it seem impossible to comply; your fears have too great a hold on you; you have been hurt so badly that trust is beyond your imagination. Right then, perhaps Jesus says, “Do you also wish to go away?”

I don’t hear Jesus shaming and blaming us when he asks us if we want to go away. I think he knows those things that stand in the way when we are asked the impossible. I hear Jesus naming the truth of one possible thought we are having – we want to go away from the weight of making a difficult choice. When Christ says “Do you also wish to go away,” I think he is also saying, “It’s okay if that’s what you want to do. I know it’s hard for you. If you go away I will still love you. But I hope you don’t go away. I hope you do this thing that is hard because you will not be alone. I will be with you while you do the hard thing, and I will stay with you after you do the hard thing. What I ask from you comes from the love I have for you. Remain with me. Don’t go away.”

In theory we know that life has its ups and downs, sometimes extreme, but we get through it. But in specific live moments we are always faced with choices to make and we don’t always want to or feel strong enough to make the right ones. It’s natural to want to go away from the values we carry when faced with a crisis or unmanageable dilemma.

Staying with Christ, keeping the faith in the promises of God, remembering that God is always involved and engaged, is difficult. When we are taught to forgive, but can’t because the hurt was too deep. When we are taught to see God in every new thing, but we can’t because the new thing wasn’t something we wanted. When we are taught to love our enemy but we can’t or won’t. Yes, I often also want to go away!

This scripture reminds us that without the Spirit we can not meet the moment. At every turn we make decisions about what we are ready for and capable of. Today’s text offers us our answer to Jesus when he asks us if we want to go away. Simon Peter answered him, “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.”

When we’re in a tough spot, we may hear Christ asking us, “Do you also want to go away?” Let us hope to answer, “Lord, where would we go?”

Amen.

