

Pentecost 14—B
John 6:60-69
Desertion or Devotion?

In the world of sports there lives a most despicable character. You'll find him or her in every stadium and in every arena. He's in the bleachers, the box seats, and the upper deck. He sits on the 50-yard line, behind the end zone, and near the half court stripe. He's called the "fair-weather fan." You all know him, don't you? He's the fellow who raises one finger and shouts, "We're Number 1" whenever his team is winning, but when his team is going to lose, the fellow gets up in disgust to leave in the middle of the fourth quarter or after the seventh inning stretch. The fair weather fan is the guy who jumps to his feet for a standing ovation when the hero blasts one over the fence in the bottom of the ninth to pull it out, but when that hero goes 0 for 5 and strikes out three times with the bases loaded, the fair weather fan suddenly becomes a first tenor among the chorus of boo-birds as they sing their number. The fair weather fan... he kind of reminds you of the rat in the cartoon who's always the first one down the towrope of a sinking ship. No true blue fan wants to be like him.

This morning we read about other followers very similar to the fair weather fan. We might want to call them "fair-weather Christians." Our text it says: "*From this time on many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him*" (66). It was because of this event that a saddened Savior turned to them who still stood beside him and asked the question: "*Do you want to leave me too?*" (67) Today our Lord Jesus wants to talk to you and me about fair weather Christianity.

I.

There was a time in Jesus' public ministry when he pulled thousands of his Jewish countrymen to himself like a magnet. So popular was Jesus Christ that thousands would walk miles and stay with him from morning to evening just to hear and watch him in action. But suddenly that changed, for as John writes: "*From this time on many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him*" (60). Why did all these disciples desert Jesus Christ? Certainly it was not because of what Jesus Christ was doing. The second verse of this chapter says: "*A great crowd of people followed him because they saw the miraculous signs he had performed on the sick.*" Folks by the thousands were bringing the lame, the blind, and the diseased of every kind to our Lord. In his love, Jesus healed them all. Everyone was singing his praise. Like the sports fan they too would have punched their fingers into the air and shouted: "Jesus of Nazareth is number 1!" The people completely lost their heart to this caring man from Galilee when after a long day of preaching and healing, instead of sending them home, Jesus fed over 5,000 of them with a little boy's lunch. Yet it says: "*From this time on many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him.*" Why this mass exodus from Jesus Christ?

Disciples were deserting him not because of what Jesus was doing but because of what Jesus was saying! The day after this great miracle, Jesus Christ preached an even greater sermon. The sermon Jesus preached fills up 24 verses of John Chapter 6. Permit me to quote a few parts of this sermon. "*I am the bread of life. Your forefathers ate the manna in the desert, yet they died. But here is the bread that comes down from heaven. If a man eats of this bread he will live forever. This bread is my flesh... Jesus said to them. 'I tell you*

the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him at the last day. For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink.” There is no spiritual life without a sinner feeding on Jesus Christ. Real life comes from him. Real life surrenders to him. Real life centers in him. Jesus told all these disciples that he had come to be much more to them than just a miracle-worker who would do away with all their physical ailments and take care of all their physical needs. In this sermon, Jesus offered himself to them as someone who would satisfy spiritual hunger and quench spiritual thirst. Jesus said to them: *“I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry and he who believes in me will never go thirsty”* (35). Loaves, fish, and healthy bodies they could appreciate from Jesus but a Savior from sins as the most important and most needed of all blessings—that turns them off and turned them into fair-weather Christians.

This is the crowd’s reaction to that sermon. We read: *“On hearing it, many of his disciples said, ‘This is a hard saying. Who can accept it?’”* (60) And just a few verses later we read: *“From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him”* (66). Yesterday they wanted him as their king; today they are leaving him by the hundreds. *“From this time on, many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him.”* Literally the Greek verb there puts this tragic sentence this way. They went away from what Jesus was offering them and went back to those things that were important to them before they met Jesus.

The sorrow that must have been in Jesus’ heart as he watched all those people, one by one walk away from him forever. How often that same sorrow still fills Jesus’ heart today as he watches the same kind of fair-weather Christianity and desertion going on. People who once walked with the Lord, but now have turned their backs on him, some in their teens, some in their middle years, yes, some even in their twilight years. Sad to say, most of us know some of these people—baptized in Jesus’ name and instructed in his Word they confessed their faith and promised lifelong loyalty to him on confirmation day. Yet for one reason or another they chose to leave Jesus and walk with him no more. Some took offense at his Word because it didn’t agree with the way they wanted to live their lives. Some were hassled and mocked because of their faith at work or at school and became ashamed of Jesus. Still others loved the things of this world more than they loved Jesus and pretty soon even their love for Jesus died out. And then there are those fair-weather Christians who might still have their names on a church membership list and yet here on the inside they too have deserted Jesus. When it comes to a baptism or a confirmation for their children or a nice church wedding or a funeral service when they die, Jesus is number 1, but when Jesus asks them to spend an hour a week with him, or live their life according to his will and his Word, or to keep faith strong by a regular eating and drinking of his body and blood, they too proclaim: *“This is a hard teaching! Who can accept it?”*

Satan has made inroads into the Christian church, spreading false doctrine, attacking the Bible, and using critics of Christianity in the media, in universities, and in politics to damage and destroy saving faith. You know about the growing numbers of “dones”—people who have left the church and say they won’t come back. And the “nones”—people who claim they have no religious affiliation. Satan is a terrorist who is cornered and knows he’s going to die—but he wants to take as many as he possibly can with him. Even here in our own church we have some members who once enthusiastically promised right here at the front of this church that they would remain faithful to Jesus and his Word, even if they had to

die to do that. Those confirmation vows have been broken. Something has happened to take away their joy of being in God's house. Our Savior's heart aches for such, and so should ours. Every effort on our part to bring these straying sheep back to their Good Shepherd should be made.

Yet our Lord Jesus doesn't have this story here in his Word for that reason alone. As Jesus watched these fair-weather Christians leave him one by one, he also said to the few who still remained at his side: "*You do not want to leave me too, do you?*" Once again there's a Greek verb filled with meaning. That Greek verb here translated as "leave" really means to "quietly slip away." Would these twelve disciples remain faithful to Jesus to the end or would they too become offended because of him and quietly slip away? Jesus knew how weak they were and how the time would come when all of them would be fair-weather Christians and desert him. One of them would never come back. Are you still a Christian this morning? Thank God if you are! But will you and I always remain faithful to our Savior? Today he turns to us here in his house and says: "*You do not want to leave me too, do you?*" There are some who believe once a Christian always a Christian. This text, the story of Judas, and centuries of history prove how foolish that idea really is. Do we sometimes think that what happened to those hundreds of disciples here couldn't ever happen to us? Make no mistake about this—the easiest thing any of us sinners can lose is not our car keys or our wallet, but our God-given faith in Jesus. That doesn't happen overnight. Faith is lost little by little. When all those disciples were deciding what they could do with him, Jesus asked them: "*Does what I'm saying offend you?*" (61) One more time the Greek verb here translated as "offend" is an all-important word. That Greek word is talking about a crooked stick to which faith is fastened in a trap and it's this baited stick by which a trap is sprung to kill the animal who grabs it. Satan has all kinds of baited sticks to get us to quietly slip away from Jesus. Are we always aware of those traps?

Maybe you have someone close who is slipping or has lost his or her faith. We all sometimes struggle with a personal doubt about something God says. Our doubts and questions keep buzzing in our brain. When you young people see so many of your classmates or friends skipping church, not listening to parents, and seeming to have much more fun than you're having by breaking God's Commandments, there's going to be a powerful tug at your heart to go off in the same direction. That is one of Satan's traps! When Jesus says: "*Follow me,*" Satan whispers to you, "*This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?*" When Jesus says: "*The world will hate you because of me,*" he'll be whispering to you: "*This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?*" What about all of us as church members? Someone once wrote: "People do not reject the Bible because it contradicts itself, but because it contradicts them." As long as the Bible talks about the vague generalities of sin, as long as the Bible talks about other people's terrible sins, it's all right. But let that Bible get personal, let Jesus through a pastor hit us with a rebuke for one of our pet sins or let the Bible give us a difficult direction for our lives, how easy then it is, for our heart to cry out in resentment: "*This is a hard teaching, who can accept it?*" The devil is always whispering to us that our ways are better than the Lord's ways, but the Bible says: "*There is a way that seems right to man, but in the end it leads to death*" (Proverbs 14:12). Or how often don't we get frustrated and fed up when all the day to day struggles, the burdens, the crosses of life weigh on us and Jesus doesn't miraculously take all our problems away from us—so frustrated and fed up that maybe we start thinking: "He's asking too much of me as his disciple"? That's also one of Satan's traps. Jesus knows what we are on the inside. Jesus knows how easy fair-weather

Christianity is for us all and how close to deserting him we sometimes come. Therefore, this Savior has to ask you and me today: *“You do not want to leave me too, do you?”* What’s our answer going to be? Listen to the answer disciple Peter gave.

II.

Peter said: *“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”* (68-69). What a confession of faith and a declaration of loyalty those words are. In essence, Peter was saying: “Lord, there just is no one else to whom we can go or want to go to but you! If we leave you we will lose heaven, because you alone have the words of eternal life. What comes from your lips comes from the lips of the living God.”

You know, it’s hard to be in the minority especially when it appears like the majority isn’t suffering any ill effects for their choice. It may appear to our eyes sometimes that majority who chooses to leave Jesus are just as successful, just as popular, just as important as if they had never left Jesus—maybe even more so. But the Savior wants us all to know that we lose if we follow that majority. For on the last day he will say to that majority: *“Depart from me, you who are cursed into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels”* (Matthew 25:41). But to the loyal and faithful minority, he will say: *“Come, you who are blessed and inherit the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world”* (Matthew 25:34).

If there is only one thing you and I carry home with us today from this sermon, let it be this: Stay with Jesus for eternal life. Never leave him. Never desert him. Never be a fair-weather Christian. Jesus, the living God, not only has the words of eternal life; Jesus, the living God is eternal life. But that didn’t happen by just a word or snap of his fingers. Jesus had to die to get that for us. It’s as if you and I needed a massive blood transfusion to keep us alive but only one donor was available. We sinners required so much blood that it would drain this one donor’s whole body. Well, Jesus Christ volunteered to let his lifeblood drain away so that you and I could live. He died himself—a terrible death on a cross—that’s the only way you and I can live.

Are there any here today who have begun to quietly slip away from Jesus Christ? Maybe I don’t know who you are but the Lord does. Let’s all of us ask ourselves today: If I take Jesus out of my life, what will I have left? Is there anybody else out there who will love me the way he does? Is there anybody else who lifts my guilt from my heart and comforts me like he does? Is there anybody else around with words that hold out better promises to me than his words do? Who else will be a friend like him to pick me up when I’m down and help me to get through each day? Who else will bless me more at school, in my marriage, or during my old age? And who else is going to keep me out of hell when I die? *“Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.”*

For those of us here today who are ashamed of all those times we were fair-weather Christians, Jesus also has this word of eternal life. It’s called forgiveness. We have forsaken Jesus, but Jesus has not yet ever forsaken us. Yes, we do let go of Jesus, but he has not let go of a single one of us. Stay with Jesus for eternal life. Every day live close to this book—his Word—because that is where Jesus is. Then I guarantee you the Holy Spirit will never let Satan rip that faith away from you.

“You do not want to leave me, do you?” What shall be our answer to his question, today, tomorrow, and until we die? God lead every soul here today to answer with Peter: *“Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.”* Amen.

Hymns: 355, 347, 356