

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost – August 26, 2018

John 6:60-69

60 On hearing it, many of his disciples said, “This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?” 61 Aware that his disciples were grumbling about this, Jesus said to them, “Does this offend you? 62 What if you see the Son of Man ascend to where he was before! 63 The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life. 64 Yet there are some of you who do not believe.” For Jesus had known from the beginning which of them did not believe and who would betray him. 65 He went on to say, “This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless the Father has enabled him.” 66 From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him. 67 “You do not want to leave too, do you?” Jesus asked the Twelve. 68 Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. 69 We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.”

Back when I graduated from the Seminary, my first call was to serve for a year as a tutor at Martin Luther College in New Ulm. Along with teaching and coaching duties, I served as a dorm supervisor. One day an ambulance pulled up to the dorm and paramedics began to unload a patient. When I went to see what was going on, they were there to drop the lady off after her discharge from the hospital. I had to explain that they were not in the right place. The building had been a nursing home years before and so possibly an old address had found its way onto a discharge form. While I could have probably found a room and a bed for her, that would not have worked out so well for her. You have to know the right person for the job—just as you wouldn’t take your car to a dentist or your toothache to a mechanic, you wouldn’t go to a college dorm looking for skilled nursing care. We see the same idea at work in our gospel lesson as we conclude our look at John 6 and consider the different reactions of Jesus’ disciples to his bread of life discussion. We will use Peter’s question, “To Whom Shall We Go?” to consider both our own reaction to Jesus’ words as well as that of our fellow disciples.

Earlier in this chapter we heard about the reaction of Jews who knew Jesus and his family and grumbled because he was not who they thought he was and he was not there to give them the physical bread that they wanted. Now in these verses the reaction turns to his disciples. Most often when we think of the disciples we have in mind the twelve men whom Jesus specially called to follow him. Jesus will address these men later in these verses, but here at the start the disciples mentioned are a larger group. A disciple is simply a student and so these disciples were following Jesus around, possibly traveling with him and learning from him.

But now they had reached a turning point in verse 60: “On hearing it, many of his disciples said, ‘This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?’” Jesus had been telling them that he was the bread of life. In the immediately preceding verses he was telling them how they should eat his flesh and drink his blood. These were not easy concepts to understand and did not make sense to their human reason. But Jesus knew what was happening: “Aware that his disciples were grumbling about this, Jesus said to them, ‘Does this offend you? What if you see the Son of Man ascend to where he was before! The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life. Yet there are some of you who do not believe’” (vv. 61-64). If they relied on their reason, on their flesh that counted for nothing, then this teaching would offend them and be a stumbling block for them. No matter what else they might try to tell themselves, only belief in his words could give them eternal life. Sadly, Jesus

knew from the beginning (v. 64) what their reaction would be: “From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him” (v. 66).

While the crowds of disciples that followed Jesus shrunk in size, this would allow him more time to train the twelve disciples. We see some of that here: “‘You do not want to leave too, do you?’ Jesus asked the Twelve.” Jesus of course would have known the answer. He already knew that one of the Twelve, Judas, would betray him (v. 64). But Simon Peter answered on behalf of the group: “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” (vv. 68-69). By God’s grace, Peter knew whom they should follow. Even if they did not always fully understand his words, he was the Savior, the Holy One of God that they needed. While Peter’s confession here would not always be so bold, as later he would deny knowing Jesus three times, that was why they needed his words. Jesus had come in grace to forgive all of their sins so that they could have eternal life. There was no one else to go to who could offer them that great gift.

So what is our reaction to Jesus’ words? Not just to what he says here as the Bread of Life but to all of what he says throughout the Bible. There are certainly hard teachings that we cannot fully understand: the Trinity—how does three persons in one God really work? Real presence—how do we receive Jesus’ body and blood along with the bread and wine? Election—why did God choose me to be saved? Then there are the teachings that we may find hard to accept. These teachings may offend us and become a stumbling block because they do not agree with the world’s standards in science or morality. They may offend us and become a stumbling block because we do not agree and we do not want our sinful behavior to be labeled as sin.

When we wrestle with hard teachings or struggle to accept God’s Word, the reaction of our sinful nature is to follow after those disciples who turned back and no longer followed Jesus. But even if we don’t actively decide to stop following Jesus, more often our sinful nature will lead us down a more passive path. We may not bother to go to church as often anymore. We may not bother to read and study his word on a regular basis. We may gradually withdraw the support of our time, money and abilities from the congregation. We may live daily lives that would not seem very Christ-like. We may turn away from him more and more to follow after other things in our lives. In the end we may still call ourselves disciples, but be them in name only.

By God’s grace our new self will react and confess like Peter. We may not understand everything in God’s Word, but we know that these are the words of eternal life as they explain how Jesus won for us our place in heaven. We may not always want to accept what God’s Word has to say, but we believe that Jesus is the Holy One of God who is greater than us and knows what is best for us. And so we continue to follow him in everything that we do. There is no one better for us to go to because he is the one answer for everything we face in our lives.

What about the reactions of our fellow disciples? Maybe we see someone who is struggling and is starting down that passive path of withdrawing from the Christian life. Maybe we know someone who was a disciple at one time but has turned back and no longer follows Jesus. For those who are struggling, we continue to reach out to them. Sometimes it will mean encouragement and continued instruction as they wrestle with what God’s Word has to say. Sometimes it will mean correction and rebuke for their sin, never in a judgmental way, but all with the goal of getting them back on the right path. At the same time, if we find ourselves on the receiving end of such a rebuke, we will not be defensive or lash out, but receive it graciously. For those who have left, we do not give up. We continue to pray for them. While we never want to get to the point of hounding or harassing someone, we will still treat them as any other

prospect, showing them Christ-like kindness and looking for opportunities to point them back to their Savior. Jesus' words are all that they need for what is most important—an eternal life with him.

You wouldn't take your car to the dentist or your toothache to a mechanic nor would you look for skilled nursing care in a college dorm. We know where to go when we need those things in our lives. The same is true for our greatest needs. When it comes to the burden of our sin, when it comes to death and the question of eternal life, when it comes to hope and comfort in the face of suffering, when it comes to the overarching philosophy for living our daily lives, to whom shall we go? By God's grace we know to go to Jesus. He has the words of eternal life. We believe that he is the Holy One of God. Let us continue to follow him each and every day and encourage others on the path that leads to our eternal life in heaven. Amen.