

Pastor's Message – 8/25/24
John 6:56-69

Several years ago, I brought my pet turtle to worship. You might remember that she was not well-behaved – she wouldn't stay in the box in which I brought her. She caused quite a stir.

Today, I've brought another pet; you may have had one back in the 70's, i.e., the 1970's. This pet is much better behaved: quiet, won't try to get out of the box, doesn't eat much. Come to think of it, doesn't eat anything. Doesn't need walks or vet visits. Doesn't need cleaning up after. You may have had a Pet Rock. You paid your money, and in return you got a stone inside of a cardboard box. The idea was that the Pet Rock was the ideal pet. If someone asked you if you had a pet, you could say: "Sure I do. I have a Pet Rock."

There's a connection between Pet Rocks and our Bible reading for today. Pet Rocks don't demand much; Jesus does. Unfortunately, many people want a Lord who is as domesticated as a Pet Rock. But in our Bible passage today from John 6, Jesus reminds us in shocking language that he will not be contained by any expectations that we try to impose upon him.

We are in our last Sunday of a sermon series on John 6. The sixth chapter of the gospel of John revolves around bread: the feeding of the 5,000 with "five barley loaves" (vv. 1-15), Jesus as "the bread of life" (v. 35), Jesus as "the living bread that came down from heaven" (v. 51), and the promise that "the one who eats this bread will live forever" (v. 58). Together, these teachings reveal the type of spiritual nourishment that Jesus provides to anyone who will dare to eat his flesh and drink his blood (v. 56).

All throughout this chapter, Jesus has been offering some hard sayings and asking tough questions. He is looking for committed followers: those who are willing to follow Him in spite of misgivings. He even asks if he has offended them by his sayings and if they are going to leave as others are.

Jesus had been talking about his flesh and blood as spiritual food and drink, which led many of those who had been hanging around Jesus to say, "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?" Suddenly, Jesus is totally **incredible**, **unbelievable**, **discredited**. He's just as foolish a notion in the minds of those ancient Jews as he is for some today.

They weren't saying that they didn't get the metaphor; it wasn't that hard to understand that Jesus was using a figure of speech. No, what they were struggling with was Jesus' explicit offer of himself as the source of true and eternal life to those who believe. For many of those who had thought of themselves as his disciples, this was just too much. They had likely attached themselves to Jesus' company thinking that he was simply a teacher -- perhaps the best teacher around, but still just a teacher. Some may have been there because Jesus had provided them actual bread or had even healed them.

But now he was saying something preposterous: Believe *in* him, dine *on* him, and he will "raise them up on the last day." It wasn't so much that it puzzled them; it *offended* them (see v. 61). (You can almost hear them say, "Who does he think he is, the Holy One of God?!") And because of this, many of those who had been following him "turned back and no longer went about with him" (v. 66).

These sayings aren't the only time Jesus has confounded his listeners. Although Jesus' claim isn't literal, it sounds shockingly cannibalistic at first, not only to "the Jews," but also to

anyone unaccustomed to thinking metaphorically. Moreover, it should be underscored that this sort of paradox between concrete and abstract thought is a common feature in John's gospel. Two other examples include Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus who could not fathom how a person could be born again, and Jesus' exchange about "living" water with the Samaritan woman (cf. John 3:1-10; 4:7-15).

However, rather than modify his figure of speech or permit the religious leaders to dismiss his outrageous claim too quickly, Jesus reinforces it: "Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me" (v. 57). The "crowd" here is clearly the same gathering that had received the meal, and Jesus' sudden departure prompts them to follow him. But it is soon evident that the crowd is following a trail of breadcrumbs, not the footsteps of the Messiah.

After these demanding sayings and expectations from Jesus, he asks the twelve if they are ready to leave as well. But "Lord," responds Simon Peter, "to whom would we go?" Too many people put their faith and future in the wrong things. As the country song, sung by Johnny Lee goes, they're "looking for love in all the wrong places." "Looking in all the wrong places until finally or if they come back or come to the One who has the words and way to life here and for eternity.

When so many left him, Jesus asked the twelve, including his betrayer: "Do you also wish to go away?" (6:67).

It's a great question to ask ourselves.

Do we wish to go away? Have we had enough? Have we been with Jesus long enough to know that he requires giving out of our abundance to the poor? That he calls us to deny ourselves, pick up our cross and follow him? That he offers peace and forgiveness, rather than revenge and the sword? That a journey with Jesus is inevitably going to bring us to a cross — an unwelcome place of death and utter rejection?

Do you wish to go away? If you do, you should go. There's no record that Jesus tried to get anyone to stay.

The go-aways. The betrayers. The stayers. Three options.

The disciples were ready with their answer. As usual, Peter speaks for the group: "Lord, to whom can we go?"

Another great question. If we wish to go away, to whom are we going to go? Where will we go? What destination offers more hope than the place we're at? What person offers answers that are more meaningful than those we get from Jesus?

So, Peter says, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" (6:68).

Sometimes it's hard to know when we've got it so good. Peter understood. He wasn't going — not yet anyway. Later, he lost his nerve. For now, he was staying the course.

Jesus has the words of eternal life. In him we have shelter for the soul.

I still remember my graduation year from high school and the discussions and votes for the class song and class motto and class poem, etc. One of those memories includes the classic poem by Robert Frost – *The Road Not Taken*. The poem, in case you are not familiar with it, speaks of how "two roads diverged in a yellow wood" and of a traveler who could not take both paths but has to make a choice. It is a thoughtful and profound poem that underscores in a subtle but powerful way that we are a product of the choices we make. Looking back on our

own lives, we see that. We choose whom we date and whom we marry. We choose our schooling and our career. We choose whether we will or won't do something. It is a real temptation for the unhappy to go back to those forks in the road of life and wonder how things might have been if a different choice had been made. However, we don't get to travel backward. We can only move ahead and choose the path that is in front of us.

Jesus, at the end of John 6, is speaking of choices too. There are two paths that he presents. One of them is to live forever. To do so, eat his flesh and drink his blood. The other option is to go back to what their ancestors had. They ate the manna and died. The manna had a purpose in its time, but it could not bring eternal life. So, Jesus presented two paths. His listeners had a choice. So do we.

Unlike Jesus selecting and calling his disciples in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, in John's gospel, disciples are weeded out by Jesus' sayings and actions. Jesus does not kick people off the team, they simply cannot take any more of his sayings and they leave. They have heard enough.

It's only August, but fall is approaching and fall activities and events. Thanksgiving Day is not that far off and that is one of the days where you will often hear the question, "Have you had enough?" you can respond, "No, I'm still hungry; give me more." Or, "Yes, I'm stuffed. I've had enough."

We've come to the end of our 5-week sermon series on Jesus as the Bread of Life; have you had enough? Has this been too much or just right? Are you still hungry for Jesus? Perhaps the key verse from the Bible reading today, is Jesus asking, "Are you also going to leave?" Have you had enough? How do you respond? If a person says, "Yes, I wish to go away," why would they say that? Why do people find Jesus just a bit too rich for their tastes? Too filling? Too much?

On the other hand, why do you stay with Jesus, when it might be easier and safer to go away? Does Peter speak for you, too?

- Where would you go to find eternal life, wholeness, and meaning? Nothing compares to Jesus.
- Jesus has the words of eternal life, but what does that mean in the here and now?
- Do you believe that Jesus is the Holy One of God?

It's a good thing to push away from the table when we're full, but not in this case. Jesus is the "Bread of life," the bread that we need every day and so, we pray, "Give us this day our daily bread ..."

This is the fifth Sunday in a row and the last Sunday in which our Bible readings will have been from John 6, with Jesus talking about bread. This time, it says his teaching was so difficult to accept that many of his followers turned away. Simon Peter spoke for the lot of the remaining disciples, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life." And, at last, Jesus started to talk about something other than bread.

We are given a choice.

In 1979, Bob Dylan won the Grammy for Best Male Rock Performance for his song, "Gotta Serve Somebody." It was his last hit single. Dylan lists a lot of people and professions in crooning that "you gotta serve somebody."

You may be an ambassador to England or France
 You may like to gamble, you might like to dance
 You may be the heavyweight champion of the world
 You may be a socialite with a long string of pearls
 -- Bob Dylan, "Gotta Serve Somebody" 1979

The song goes on for seven verses.

Serving, according to Dylan, is not an option, only the choice of masters is left to the individual.

If you have chosen to follow and serve Jesus, what does your life look like? What does your choice say about you? if you are what you eat, do you look like and act like Jesus?

If this Church is founded and grounded on the words of Jesus, what should it look like?

There was a card tucked into a late-19th-century cookbook, titled "Scorecard for Judging Bread," which sums up these last 5 weeks well. It describes what a Church looks like which ingests Jesus.

A Church can be described by:

General Appearance (10%): Shape — roundness of dome, smoothness — no cracks, bulges, or lumps; color — slightly golden brown. What does our church look like to guests and to the community? How is our facility maintained? What's the "first impression"?

Lightness (10%): What kind of spirit do people experience here? Is there a lightness, a sense of God's presence in our worship and our relationships? Is there a sense of mystery and wonder and awe? Is the love of God expressed and shared?

Crust (10%): Thickness, quality, crispness, tenderness. What are the barriers that people must overcome to feel at home here? What are our "crunchy" parts? What are the parts that people would like to "cut off" to get to the good parts?

Crumb (5%): Color, cream. Do we stick together, or does our life together crumble because of conflict?

Texture (25%): No streaks or extreme classes of given size and uniformity of cells (thinness of cell walls); elasticity, softness, springiness. Are we a flexible church? Are we elastic enough to respond to needs as they arise? Are our cell walls thin and flexible enough to allow all people to participate? Do we "give way" to the touch of God?

Flavor (35%): Taste and odor (sweet, nutty flavor with no off-taste). Are we palatable? Are people attracted by the "aroma" of our worship and fellowship? Do we provide nourishment so vital that people come back again and again for more? Do people want to share us and our message with others?

Keeping Qualities (5%): Milk bread keeps better than bread made with water. Are we made for the long term? Do we have a long-range vision, God's vision, for the future? Are we ever-fresh, or are we growing stale? Are we open to where God may still be leading us and how and who we will be into the future?

...anyone who feeds on me will live because of me. ⁵⁸ I am the true bread that came down from heaven. Anyone who eats this bread will not die ... but will live forever." (vs. 57-58) The Christian, follower of Jesus, the Church grounded and founded in and on Jesus, will look like him, act like him, and speak the words he spoke. That church has a future: a future of service and ministry and giving.