

Pastor's Message – Ash Wednesday, 25
John 6:60-69

Once upon a time, there was a good excuse for not reading the Bible. Back before Gutenberg's invention of the printing press that made mass-produced books possible, Bibles were rare, and most people could not even read anyway. What most people knew of Bible stories — in medieval times, or even earlier — was based on sermons they'd heard in church, or maybe images they'd seen in stained glass.

That's hardly true today! Stop by a bookstore or do an Amazon search, and you'll see dozens of Bibles to choose from — different translations and all manner of special editions. The Bible's probably more accessible today, to a greater number of people on this planet, than it has ever been in human history.

I, myself, have progressed through a number of Bible translations in my life. My first Bible was a Good News Bible. Most of my Bible exposure was in the Catholic Church which used the American Standard or the New Jerusalem translation. When I entered the seminary, I had to choose my own Bible translation and landed on the Revised Standard Version and then the New Revised Standard Version when that came out. You may have noticed that, although occasionally I still use different translations for worship service, I have pretty much landed on the New Living Translation. A clergy colleague of mine when I was in Shell Lake, the Rev. Jack Starr, introduced me to that translation. They all have their pluses and minuses.

But, as we enter this year's season of Lent and tonight's Ash Wednesday worship service, whatever the Bible translation you prefer, we will be focusing on the "red letter" versions of the Bible: red letters that indicate the words of Jesus. Our focus for Sunday worship services during Lent and Wednesday evening Bible studies will be on "The Message of Jesus: Words that Changed the World."

Just before our Bible passage tonight, 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 is just as foolish a notion in the minds of those ancient Jews as it is for many today.

Maybe it's because they couldn't get past the ick factor — the seemingly cannibalistic language that Jesus was using.

Maybe it's because they simply couldn't accept the gift that Jesus was offering them — there was no way they could “earn” it, no list of righteous boxes to check, no requirements to clean your hands and use proper table manners.

Or maybe it was because of the exclusive nature of Jesus' offer — if he's the only “real bread,” it eliminates all the others. In the search to fill the gnawing emptiness inside, people turn to a wide variety of cheap, processed, mass-produced “breads” that ultimately leave them starving to death: money, sex, power, “stuff.”

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 (v. 61). (You can almost hear them say, “Who does he think he is, the Holy One of God, the Messiah?!”) And because of this, many of those who had been following him “turned back and no longer went about with him” (v. 66). In effect, those who abandoned Jesus that day were classifying Jesus' claim as so much *bunk*.

We have so many options today in addition to bread: different kinds of rice, different kinds of pasta, different varieties of potatoes, different kinds of bread. But Jesus is saying he is the only bread that people need.

Those who turned away 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 when he fed the 5,000 or when he fed the 4,000 or had even healed them.

Jesus is the only bread they need. At the beginning we read about the amazing feeding of the five thousand with five loaves and a couple of fish — basic nutrition provided via mass production. Having received this gift, the crowd pursues Jesus around to the other side of the lake (he himself having walked across it) looking for more. Like their Israelite ancestors, who received a daily portion of manna in the desert, the crowd is clamoring to be fed on a similar scale with “bread from heaven” — the kind of plain old daily bread one might expect from a cosmic convenience store.

But Jesus isn't interested in making bread for subsistence; he is the Bread of Life — the “true bread from heaven ... that which ... gives life to the world” (vv. 32-33). He is bread conceived in the mind of a master Baker, the Creator of all that is good. In Jesus' own sacrifice on the cross, with his own flesh and blood, Jesus the Bread of Life is uniquely and incarnationally crafted to satisfy the recommended nutritional allowance for eternal life for all who feed on him and his words. His own flesh and blood, freely offered for the salvation of the world, are “true bread” and “true drink” (v. 55).

The “true bread” that Jesus offers is the kind that brings people into a deep relationship with God. Breaking bread with someone was a sign of true intimacy in the ancient world — a sign that those who participated in the meal were bonded for life.

In a shocking reinterpretation of this tradition, Jesus offers himself to the world as “bread” — the means through which God and humanity become bonded for eternal and abundant life. “Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me ... he who feeds on me will live forever” (v. 57-58 NIV). “Feeding” on Jesus is a means of taking in all that he offers — the satisfying fullness of salvation, the daily nutrients of the indwelling Holy Spirit and the strength to live life to the full with an eternal perspective.

But so many who could not accept Jesus' words, so many deserted Jesus that day, that only the Twelve were still with him. Apparently, he wasn't sure where they were in all this either. Thus, he asks them, “Do you also wish to go away?”

Simon Peter, speaking for the group, says, “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." Those who walk away from Jesus cannot see the gift of redeeming grace that Jesus offers.

There was a farmer who had barely managed to eke out a modest existence living off some awful farmland in South Carolina. He struggled year after year to get crops to grow on his land. Finally, after a particularly meager harvest, he gave up, sold his land, and went to work in a factory.

The new owner who bought this land noticed the poor vegetation on the property. He therefore didn't pay much for the acreage.

One day, walking over his property, he noticed a strange formation of white rock. He'd always been interested in geology. So, he chipped some of the rock and took it to a geologist friend for analysis. To make a long story short, he eventually sold the property for millions. His land contained a huge deposit of a mineral used in the processing of aluminum and other metals.

One man walked away, unaware. Another man didn't.

As we come to this Ash Wednesday worship service tonight and start this year's season of Lent, as we begin our Bible study next Wednesday on The Message of Jesus, we are invited to open our hearts and minds and souls to the words of Jesus that can change our lives. Lord, what do you want me to know or feel today? How do the words of Jesus move in our souls in these days to come.

"The Spirit alone gives eternal life," Jesus says in verse 63. "And the very words I have spoken to you are spirit and life (vs. 63)". Jesus offers all that we need for life: in this world and the next. Jesus offers salvation in this life and in the life to come. Come to Jesus and live. Where else can we go, asks Peter? "You [alone, Jesus] have the words that give eternal life."