John 6:66-69

66 Because 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.’

Jesus by Default

As we learned last week, Jesus does not mince words: he speaks clearly about what it means to be a Christian, and I equate Christian and disciple: if you profess true faith in Jesus Christ, by extension you FOLLOW Jesus Christ. Not in the sense that a groupie follows a rock band, but as a mountain climber follows a guide because your life depends on him. Or to give another example, if my son, who went off to college yesterday, decides not to attend any of his classes, he can hardly call himself a STUDENT at Stony Brook, even though he is enrolled at the college.

So it is with a disciple. You attend to Jesus, you learn from him, you do your homework, and God knows you will be tested.

Some of God’s tests are easy; others not so. Coming to church as a child is easy because you may not have a choice. When we are confirmed in faith, whether as a teenager or an adult, it’s easy for us to say “I will” when asked if we will renounce evil and commit our lives to Christ and his Church. It’s easy to attend church, even when a sermon convicts you and urges you to change. It’s easy to read the Bible, even when the word of God disturbs your sense of ease and rocks your foundation. But when the rubber hits the road, so to speak, the tests can become harder. If your marriage is strained, can you persevere and continue to love when your spouse is struggling to love you back? When a friend is making decisions that seem to be leading him down a dark road, can you speak bluntly to him, urging him not to take the wide path that leads to destruction?[[1]](#footnote-1) When poverty and sickness and hunger become all too clear to you, will you minister to those in need? When people speak vitriol against people of other religions or cultures or beliefs, will you refute their lies, even when your own welfare is in jeopardy?

When those around you speak cynically of a selfish world poised on the edge of self-destruction, will you share the good news of a loving and powerful God who stands ready to heal the individual soul as well as the balance of his creation? When a difficult test comes, will you prove yourself a disciple of Jesus Christ or not?

Jesus demands that those who wish to be disciples must eat his flesh and drink his blood, and because of what he says, many stopped following him. They may have thought that Jesus was speaking literally, and they were appalled at the very thought of such an act. But considering what is involved in true discipleship, eating Jesus’ flesh and drinking his blood, as disgusting as it sounds, are really minor tasks compared to what true discipleship may entail. They’re like taking medicine; we could hold our breath and quickly swallow, and it would be over within seconds. But to eat Jesus’ flesh and drink his blood in the way he meant for that to be understood, that is much more challenging. I recall my admissions interview at NYTS, when I was describing my calling to ministry, and saying what I hoped would convince the admissions officer into accepting me. And when he assured me that I was accepted, he smiled broadly and encouraged me by saying that in seminary, “You will come to know God, and it will cost you your life.” Up to that point, I had not thought of this new career as costing me my life. His words were sobering to say the least. I almost wished that I *hadn’t* been accepted. Yet I understand what this admissions officer meant, and I now know what Jesus meant when he said that to be his disciple, one must eat my flesh and drink my blood. It’s what Jesus meant when he asked James and John if they could drink of the same cup from which he drank.[[2]](#footnote-2)

It’s what he meant when he said, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

And what Jesus demands is too much for a lot of folks; Jesus stands on the brink of being a very, very lonely man in today’s reading. Up to this time, he had been filling the arenas with mesmerized listeners. He was playing to a sold-out audience. There were tail gate parties going on before he went on stage. But now it was clear that those days were over. So many of those who had been following him to this point decided they could go no further. So shocked were his followers at his disgusting expectations that even those die-hard disciples must have had a shocked, dumbfounded expression on their faces as Jesus asks them, “Do you also wish to go away?”

There are reasons why it was Peter, and not any other disciples, who would later lead the church in Jerusalem. There are reasons Jesus gave him the name Peter (petros, meaning “rock”) and said that “upon this rock I will build my Church.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Peter, who we joke about as suffering from “foot-in-mouth” disease, Peter who is so prone to make promises that he could not keep, Peter who resembles you and I in so many ways, who struggles with his failures and sometimes says things he later regrets. It’s Peter who truly shines at this moment. “Do you also wish to go away?” Jesus asks. Peter replies in characteristic candor, speaking on behalf of the twelve, “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.” For all of Peter’s shortcomings, one must admire him for being able to recognize Truth when it confronts him. Jesus is the real McCoy. He is the Holy One of God. Peter says, “We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.” First came that step of faith, that belief that *maybe* Jesus is the Holy One. And that faith is confirmed by experience, and so becomes knowledge that Jesus is in fact the Holy One of God. Peter and the others took that initial step of faith, and now they know that Jesus has the words of eternal life. Where else can they go? Were they to tread any other path, were they to commit themselves to any other Master, they would forfeit what they know to be Truth. And so, as unpalatable as it may be to “eat the flesh” and “drink the blood,” what else are they to do? What option do they have?

Today, Jesus asks us the same question that he posed Peter and the others. It’s the same question he asks every human being who is challenged to become his disciple. Every time we grow tired of conflict within the church, every time we’re asked to sacrifice our time or money or attention to someone we may not be fond of, every time we are confronted with human suffering and reminded that regardless of how big the world is, everyone is our neighbor,

every time we are reminded of the cost of obeying Jesus, we can hear Jesus asking us, “Do you wish to go away?”

And I pray that we can answer like Peter answered. Because I don’t believe that many people can answer with sincere enthusiasm, “Yes, Lord! I’ll follow you to the ends of the earth!” Our response is more likely to resemble Peter’s response. “Where else can we go? There are no options; only you are the Holy One of God. Only you have the words of eternal life. By default, I choose you, Jesus. In none other do I experience the full and perfect love of God. In none other do I experience the depth of his forgiveness. In none other do I trust to lead me in paths of righteousness. By default, it’s you, Jesus. Here is my life.”

While altar calls seem to be out of vogue these days, even at revivals, I invite all of you to offer Jesus an honest answer at this time. You may have committed your life to Christ years ago,

but the cost of discipleship has been weighed upon you so much that all you feel you can do anymore is come to church. You may have started down the road with Jesus with great enthusiasm, but the disappointments with church or family or friend or work or health have left you at the crossroads, not sure how to answer Jesus’ question, “Do you also wish to leave?”

We may not be gung-ho and promise Jesus that we will lay down our lives for him, but maybe we can answer as Peter: “Lord, where else can I go?” Can we offer Jesus this? Can we say, even reluctantly, “Lord, I’ve got nowhere else to go, and so I choose to follow you.” Let us confess to Jesus as we confess to one another that we know of nowhere else to go for words of eternal life. There is no God who loves us more, who sacrifices more, who would suffer and die for us.

There is nowhere else that we can go.

Prayer: Lord, we come to you not as zealots, but acknowledging that in no one else can we find such love, such sacrifice, and such promise. You alone have the words for eternal life. You alone are the Holy One. All other paths lead to fear and regret and death. Hear our weak declaration that we offer to you now: We have nowhere else to go. There is none but you. Help us to drink the cup that you place before us. Help us on this road to discipleship. Help us to love you the way you love us. Help us to love others as you love them. Build our faith that we may declare, like Peter, that we can declare like Peter that we not only believe you are Lord; we know it. And then help us to follow your son Jesus wherever he may lead us. Amen.\*

1. Reference [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Mark 10:38 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Luke 9:23 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Matthew 16:18 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)