

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost; August 25, 2024

+ John 6:51-69 +

“Jesus is the Best Choice You’ll Never Make”

“I am the living bread that which came down from heaven. If anyone eats this bread, he will live forever. The bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”

At that, the Jews argued among themselves, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?”

So Jesus said to them, “Amen, Amen, I tell you: Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life in yourselves. The one who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the Last Day. For my flesh is real food, and my blood is real drink. The one who eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him. 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. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like your fathers ate and died. The one who eats this bread will live forever.”

He said these things while teaching in the synagogue in Capernaum. When they heard it, many of his disciples said, “This is a hard teaching! Who can listen to it?”

But Jesus, knowing in himself that his disciples were grumbling about this, asked them, “Does this cause you to stumble in your faith? What if you would see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? The Spirit is the one who gives life. The flesh does not help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life. But there are some of you who do not believe.” For Jesus knew from the beginning those who would not believe and the one who would betray him. He said, “This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is given to him by the Father.”

After this, many of his disciples turned back and were not walking with him anymore. So Jesus asked the Twelve, “You do not want to leave too, do you?”

Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.”

The last two thirds of John chapter 6, known as the Bread of Life Discourse, is a long discussion with Jesus at the center. You are now hearing a sermon on it for the third straight Sunday, and even these three sermon struggle to scratch the surface of Jesus’ words.

The first, long section of the discussion is between Jesus and a crowd. If you missed the two sermons on that part, you should: stop listening to this one, go home, watch those two sermons on YouTube and then watch this one. Just kidding. What you should do is let Jesus catch you up and what he said to the crowd, because he summarizes and concludes it at the start of these verses. Sinners need Jesus. Without him, we have no lasting life. But he is the Bread of Life, the gift of God who comes down from heaven to save. When you believe that Jesus saves you from your sins, you eat the Bread that gives you life eternal. Jesus will never lose you, and he will raise you up on the Last Day to life that lasts. Focus your life on the Bread that lasts, not the kind that spoils.

What good news it is that Jesus is our Bread of Life, freely given for the life of the world! That’s what Jesus said to the crowd at large, which had followed him and his disciples around the lake, hoping for another miraculous feeding after Jesus stuffed thousands. But he didn’t just say it to the crowd; he said it also to

his disciples, to those who already believed in him. And this Bread of Life Discourse now concludes with the reaction of those who were already following him, who already believed. **When they heard it, many of his disciples said, “This is a hard teaching! Who can listen to it?”** Many of his disciples said that. Not one. Not a few. Many. **After this, many of his disciples turned back and were not walking with him anymore.** Many Bible scholars mark this moment as the end of what’s sometimes called, “Jesus’ Time of Popularity,” or “Year of Fame.” And that makes sense. Telling people they must feed on your flesh and drink your blood to live forever, that you are life-giving bread that came down from heaven, is not a way to get or stay popular and famous. Healing people? Yes. Feeding people by the thousands? Yes. Telling them to feed on you to live forever? No. These disciples call Jesus’ teaching “hard,” not like calculus or a Raymond Carver short story: not intellectually hard to understand, but “hard” as in objectionable, offensive, impossible to believe. What part of it? They refer to the teaching as a single unit: all of it is impossible to give their faith.

Jesus follows their turn away by turning toward his remaining disciples. **So Jesus asked the Twelve, “You do not want to leave me too, do you?”** Jesus phrases his question expecting an answer of “no.” Simon Peter does much better than a simple, “No, we want to stay.” We often use the disciples as negative examples, and it’s only fair to point out when they do and say good things. And in this case Peter speaks words that are so much better than good: **Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.”** What makes his answer so much better than a simple, “No, we want to stay”? Peter’s answer reveals that he – and the Twelve – not only understand Jesus’ “hard” teaching intellectually (a little child can easily do that), but also that they believe it. We don’t want to go to anyone else because you, Jesus, are the one who speaks the message of eternal life. You speak words that tell sinners to believe in you, because you are the Christ, the Son of God, who saves them for eternity.

We cannot know if Peter was surprised by Jesus’ question, or the tone with which he answered. But it’s easy to imagine some strength in the delivery of such a beautifully worded answer. “Jesus, what else could we do but stay with you? Why would we ever want to leave? Where else could we ever want to go? We have no choice!”

Jesus agrees with that way of thinking. He’s not the disciples’ choice. Or yours. Or mine. Jesus says: **“The Spirit is the one who gives life. The flesh does not help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life.”** Jesus speaks the words of life, the words that point to himself – his holiness for your life in heaven, his death for your life eternal, his resurrection for your return life. He speaks life in himself, and commands you to believe it to receive his life. And the Spirit gives you life through faith in Jesus. And what help were you in this work: **“The flesh does not help at all.”** You never would have chosen him. Neither would I have. Neither would Peter have, or any of the Twelve, or any of the countless who were given faith by the Spirit and now enjoy life with Jesus in heaven.

So, we know what it’s like not to get any credit for things. Have you ever worked on a team and had your name left off the project? Ever not get mentioned by a mentee accepting an award? Ever had a kid wolf down the meal you made without even looking at you, let alone thanking you? We want the credit for good things we are involved in. And so do Christians when it comes to their faith. “There must be something better in me who stays here with Jesus than there is in the rest who turn away. I must have been born with at least some little spark of something special.” The fellowship you belong to officially

denies such thinking. But do we as individuals? Why do you believe in Jesus? Why do you stay with him?
“The flesh does not help at all.”

But what difference does it make? You wonder. Isn't this kind of a finer point of Scripture. What does it matter if Jesus was my choice or not? It matters, first, because it's a bad idea to disagree with the Son of God. And it matters very practically because this idea that Jesus is my choice is the starting block of pride which, once out of the blocks, will run wild until it runs over any need for the Spirit or the words of Christ.

But we want to raise our hands and ask questions! If Jesus is no one's choice, if faith depends completely on his life-giving words and the Spirit's work, if the unbelieving flesh contributes nothing, then why am I in here with Jesus while others are out there? Why isn't everyone in here or everyone out there? Why have some of the kids I went to Sunday School turned away from Jesus? Why have some of the kids I was confirmed with stayed in faith? The best answer we can give is the one Jesus gives in another place: **“The wind blows where it pleases.”** It is a most unsatisfying answer to our intellect, but it is the divine answer: God knows why, and he's not pleased to share on this one.

You, just be happy that you answer like Peter, are one that the Spirit brought to life with faith in the Bread of Life.

But another hand goes up! But don't I choose Jesus now? Now that I have been brought to life, don't I choose to keep listening to the words of life, to keep feeding on him in his Supper? Didn't Peter and the Twelve choose to stay while the others bailed? Okay, if you need to insist on having some choice in the matter! Yes! Technically! Because you have faith in Jesus you can now choose to answer like Peter. It's your choice to hang on Jesus' saving words.

But why? No one makes any choice in a vacuum. If you opted for the blue shirt this morning there was a reason. You may not have entered a three-hour pro and con debate with yourself, but there was something about that shirt that made you choose it. There was something about the taste of eggs that made you fry them up for breakfast. You didn't pick that because you think eggs are disgusting.

Do you see what I mean? Even after you come to faith, it's who Jesus is that makes you keeping choosing him! So maybe it's better to think of it this way: Jesus is so good and so appealing to your believing heart that it's really no choice at all. The Spirit keeps you coming back to him and staying with him with Jesus' own words of life, words and promises you see backed up and fulfilled by his holy life for your life in heaven, his death for your life eternal, his resurrection for your body's return to life. It's his goodness that really makes the choice to stay no choice at all. Amen.