

Rev. Bill Gaskill

Elmer Presbyterian Church

14th Sunday after Pentecost

Sunday, August 25, 2024

Scripture: Ephesians 6:10-20; John 6:56-69

Sermon: Spirit Life

One summer when our grandchildren were much younger, Jean and I were doing much childcare, as their mother, our daughter, was working. So we decided to join a neighborhood swim club to which we went most weekday afternoons.

I don't recall exactly how old Logan was, but I think he was about eight years old. He learned to swim and earned his wrist band which entitled him to go into the diving well and go off the diving boards. The low board was no problem, but the high dive was another matter.

One day his cousin Caitlyn, who is two years younger than Logan was there for a visit and she quickly mounted the ladder and jumped off the high dive. Logan wanted desperately to do it too, but when he reached the top of the ladder and walked out onto the end of the board, his courage failed him.

Down below, we were treading water, encouraging him to take the leap. He just couldn't muster up enough nerve and sheepishly descended the ladder to solid ground. Eventually he made it, but it took some real persistence to summon up the guts he needed.

What caused this memory to well up from back in what now seems like the mists of forgotten time was the consideration of our text from John 6 that comes at the end of one of the longest sermons of Jesus, what some call his bread sermon.

To refresh your memory, the prelude to this sermon included a miracle feeding of thousands of people following him to hear his teaching and behold his signs and wonders. In response to getting one free meal they wanted to crown him king right then and there.

Jesus knew it wasn't his time yet. Instead of permitting a coronation, he sent the disciples off across the Sea of Galilee in a boat without him, and then Jesus went off alone, up onto the mountain to pray.

Next Jesus' famous water walk had people searching for him with real urgency. They wanted more free food. When they found Jesus, he chided them for seeking perishable bread and urged them to seek the bread that would last and nourish them for all eternity. Back and forth they went, the congregation hide-bound in the concerns of their flesh and their own appetites and Jesus speaking to them with spiritual words, trying to redirect their energy to things that really matter, things that would fill their lives here and follow them on into eternal life.

They demanded that he give them more bread, even if it was poor people's bread. He said, "I am the bread of life. I am the bread that has come down from heaven, better than manna, more satisfying than that which came down in the time of Moses, bread that will transport you even beyond the day of your own death and bring you whole and made well into the kingdom of my Father.

And then came the coup de grace: "Very truly I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. The one who eats this bread will live forever." In other words, unless you come to me in faith and feed upon a deep and committed relationship to me every day for the rest of your natural life, you are dead already.

Jesus doesn't settle for a bride without intimacy and commitment. He desires for us to enter a deeply personal relationship with him. That's what he meant by saying they must eat his flesh and drink his blood. But locked into their literalistic, fleshly way of thinking and hearing, they just didn't get it.

This is the Eucharistic punch line of the whole sermon and the reason Jesus set Holy Communion as the center piece of Christian worship. We are baptized once to demonstrate that we are named individuals. Salvation is not a group event. Salvation comes to us first in our own particularity. God doesn't save people in groups. God saves one by one by one.

Our assembly line operators and efficiency obsessed entrepreneurs who are skilled in overlooking the uniqueness of individuals and lumping them together as consumers who can be easily manipulated think this is a highly impractical way to save the world. But we are named and baptized into a body, the Body of Christ, one by one by one. Jesus does not negate our unique identity, he enhances it, then joins it into his Church.

Once we are adopted into the family of God, anticipating the great marriage supper of the Lamb where all the baptized will sit down together in the presence of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we repeat the Eucharist, the Holy Supper, over and over and over, as many times as we can. We do it to remember that we have ingested the presence of the resurrected Jesus who was sent by the Father and lives in us through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. We do it as a constant reminder that we have been, and are continually being, redeemed by the dynamic ministry of the whole Trinity, of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

We have come to Jesus for this only because the Father, in great grace and mercy, has drawn us to him. Our heavenly Father is not willing that one should perish. God wants above all things in his creation for us to live with him in glory. All the creative regenerative power of heaven is being exercised on our behalf. How much more power do you need? The Bible says that the same power that raised Jesus from the dead is the very power at work in us who believe.

With these and some other words, Jesus has prodded those would-be followers up the ladder and coaxed them to the very end of the high board overlooking a very deep pool. He was encouraging them to take the necessary leap of faith that would involve them in abundant and eternal life. The Danish theologian Soren Kierkegaard likened faith to being like the dizzy feeling you get when suspended over 70,000 fathoms of water.

This invitation given by Jesus for growth in spiritual life is exactly the same for us today as it was back then. Drawn to Jesus by the Father, we come to a juncture, to a point of decision: will we surrender to Jesus and allow him to lead us wherever he chooses or will we, like the crowd that day, decide to turn back and resume going our own way, trying to make the best of life without Jesus.

In this passage we see the full range of human responses to Jesus' offer of salvation.

The usual first question that the flesh demands to have answered is the "how" question, which arose back in verse 42: "Is not this the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, 'I have come down from heaven?'" And verse 52, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" In other words, "How can this man be the bringer of our salvation? We've known him since he was just a little kid."

Think of how often Jesus was affronted by these questions of how: how did the man born blind receive his sight; how did a man crippled for

years take up his mat and go home; how did a little girl and a young boy get up off of their death beds; how did Jesus get across the sea without a boat and taking no road; how did he call Lazarus back to life after four days dead; how did he feed thousands of people on more than one occasion with minimal resources; how did he emerge victorious over death on the first Easter; how, how, how? How did he walk through a wall and then eat fish? How was he transfigured on one occasion and taken out of their sight up into heaven on another? How? This is but a small list of the questions recorded in the New Testament.

Because they couldn't answer any of these "how" questions they became offended in him. Who does he think he is? Is he greater than Moses? We doubt that. Is he greater than our ancestor Jacob who dug the well where Jesus evangelized a Samaritan woman? Who is he anyway? What are his credentials that we should believe in him? We demand answers and proof!

And speaking of questions, one of the most important questions any of us have to answer is Jesus' question to his first disciples on the road from Caesarea Philippi; it's the question that Jesus asks after the spate of "how" questions: "Who do you say that I am?" Peter blurted out, "You are the Messiah, the Holy One of God." One week after Easter, Doubting Thomas, upon seeing the wounds in the hands and side of the resurrected Jesus and being invited to reach out and touch them, fell to his knees and confessed, "My Lord and my God."

That is in fact exactly who Jesus is, whether you accept it or not. How do you answer that question; who is Jesus to you?

Unbelief is one way many answer the question. Along with being offended, there was and still is the response of outright unbelief among people. There are always people who simply don't believe any of Jesus' claims. The water is too deep, and they don't know how to swim. And maybe they are too scared, too cynical, or too proud to take the risk, to jump in and find out how Jesus saves and what it will mean to them personally.

Then there is betrayal, those who start out with Jesus but somewhere along the way bail out and end up betraying his trust. Discipleship isn't what they thought, and they didn't count the cost before they set out. We are told that Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe, and we are told he already knew who was to betray him.

Later we learn the betrayer's name, Judas Iscariot. He was more than an anonymous face in the crowd. He was one of those chosen by Jesus to be in his inner circle. Judas witnessed the signs and wonders, heard the same teachings as the rest of the twelve, but something in his soul misfired. He was close enough to know what the rest knew but something blinded him. Lust for money made him behave like a petty thief and then finally he sold his soul for 30 silver coins.

Isn't it amazing that Jesus continued to let him tag along with money then murder in his heart? Judas projected his own spiritual deadness off onto Jesus who died in his place. Judas ended up in deep remorse and took his own life. Maybe Jesus kept him close to show that even evil designs by the enemy can be made to serve the purposes of God.

Jesus did not die as a helpless victim. He was crucified by the plan and foreknowledge of Almighty God. Maybe Jesus was giving Judas time to repent, giving him time for amendment of life as the Anglican prayer of confession goes. Paul wrote in Philippians 2 that every knee will bow, and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father. Every knee, not just willing knees, not just faithful and friendly knees; every knee will bow. God's enemies will in the end recognize their defeat.

Even in Gethsemane Jesus asked Judas, "Friend, what are you doing here?" I hear an ancient echo in the question that goes all the way back to God's first question of human beings: "Adam, where are you?"

Do you find it unnerving that Jesus still knows who believes and who does not? You really can't hide from God. When God called out in the garden, "Adam, where are you?" it was an invitation for Adam to locate himself in relationship to God. Maybe Jesus was doing the same for Judas there in the Garden of Gethsemane: two gardens, same question, where are you? Dare we believe that he would do the same for you and me if we get caught up betraying Jesus in one of the many ways people have of doing just that?

There are many ways to betray someone you love. Not all adultery is physical and it is not limited to married couples. Most of our acts of betraying Jesus are more subtle than that of Judas but no less pernicious. We know it's a sin, but we do it anyway. We know we should speak up, but our courage fails us. We know the gods of this world, the unholy trinity of money, sex, and power will leave us disappointed and empty, but we let them rule our thoughts and our behavior in so many ways both large and

small. The list goes on, and Jesus sees right through all of our attempts to cover these sins up. We hate to admit it but isn't there a little bit of Judas in all of us?

As God invited Adam, so Jesus invited Judas to turn and come out into the open and let God examine him and then cover him with mercy. Why do you think we always include a prayer of confession in our worship services? In humility we agree that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. We are part of that group called all and it does no good to hide.

If you are hiding in the weeds of unbelief, the Father is drawing and Jesus is calling you to come, eat and drink. This is my body which is for you. This cup is the new covenant in my blood; all of you drink of it. To give your heart and your love to Jesus in response to his sacrifice of love for you is indeed your most Holy Communion!