

14th Sunday after Pentecost (L21B) – August 26, 2018
John 6:56-69 – Fed Up with Jesus

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Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Today we finally come to the end of the marathon of readings from the sixth chapter of John's gospel. It has been five straight weeks of readings from the same chapter, all of them in one way or another about "bread" and Jesus being the Bread of Life. From the discussions on the ELCA Clergy Facebook group, you could tell that many pastors were running out of ideas on how to spin this theme yet again. You might say they're pretty much fed up with John chapter six by now.

Fed up is also what many of Jesus' disciples are by the time we get to today's reading. They have seen Jesus feed a huge crowd in the wilderness, and then compare himself to the manna that came down from heaven to feed the Children of Israel as they made their way through the wilderness. He is pretty clearly comparing himself to Moses here. In fact, he says that what he has to offer is even greater than what God did for the Israelites through Moses. That miraculous manna was just food. It kept them from starving, but they're all dead now! I am here with something better, says Jesus, something that leads to eternal life. That's quite a claim – better than Moses. But then he ups the ante, talking about giving his flesh for the life of the world. Only if you eat his flesh and drink his blood will you have true life. Now, as I said last week, we should be careful not to think of this as a journalistic report of events as they happened and get bogged down in what the disciples might have been thinking or feeling. What John is really doing here is talking about the difficulty of bearing witness to Jesus in the early church. What Jesus says is hard to hear, and this no doubt reflects what the early church experienced in communicating the Gospel as a community gathered around word and sacrament, who talked about being buried with Jesus in baptism, and eating his flesh and drinking his blood in Holy Communion, and claiming that these strange things are somehow the key to life. The church at the turn of the second century knew what it meant to lose their audience. The story of Jesus' disciples leaving him in droves would have resonated with their experience. Only the twelve, Jesus' inner circle, remain. "Are you going too?" he asks them, as if to say, "Was that too much for you? Too crazy?" It's almost like he's pushing them, trying to find out what it would take to make them give up on him.

I think that the church in 21st-century, at least in the so-called first world, is finally beginning to return to this early-church reality after centuries of conflating the gospel and the dominant culture. It is finally becoming clear that the promises and values of our culture are fundamentally different from the promises and values of the gospel, and that the gospel sounds like foolishness when compared with the wisdom of the world. They don't sit easily together. They force a choice. So that leads me to ask an uncomfortable question: where is your breaking point? What would it take for you to give up on God? I can immediately think of one example for myself: I do not have the faith of Abraham, who was prepared to sacrifice his own son at God's command. I know that I would have failed that test. In Abraham's place I would have said, "Sorry, God, I'm not your man. Not gonna kill my own son. Strike me down right now, but it's not going to happen." And then there's the story of Job. I'm afraid I'd fail that one too. Not sure, but seriously afraid that I would be cursing God by at least the mid point of that story.

But what about you? Where is your breaking point with God? What would it take for you to finally be so fed up with God that you would turn your back on your faith altogether? Would it be your friend the atheist, continually pointing out all the wacky things that some of your fellow Christians say and seem to believe? Would it be your friend the fundamentalist, whose view of

God seems so narrow, so punitive? Or your Evangelical friend who seems willing to compromise all morality for political gain? Or would it be your liberal Christian friend whose faith seems little more than a cover for a particular social agenda? Or would it maybe be your friend of another religion, who is kind, generous, and selfless, and who puts you and all the other Christians you know to shame? Or would it be a voice from inside, disappointment that your life has not gone the way you think it should have gone, the way you planned? Would it be tragedy? A national disaster? Would it be a diagnosis of cancer? The death of a friend? The death of your spouse or your child? Or maybe several of these things put together. What would it take to push you over the edge?

I don't want you to think about that too long, and I'd rather that you didn't have to find out the answer. But if you did happen to find out, if push finally did come to shove and you found yourself abandoning your faith, you wouldn't be alone. In fact, you'd be in the company of Martin Luther, who found his breaking point in the medieval church's system of penance. At one point he was so overwhelmed by God's demand for righteousness that he actually found himself hating God. Luther eventually found the solution to his crisis of faith in the person of Jesus himself. With help from Paul's letter to the Romans he came to realize that God's impossible demands are met by Jesus on our behalf, and that it is God's faithfulness to us, rather than our faithfulness to God, that ultimately makes all the difference.

And that, I think, is the key takeaway from this sixth chapter of John that we are finally done with today. Many of Jesus' disciples stopped following him after chapter six. They got fed up and left. But let's remember that by the time of his crucifixion, all of Jesus' disciples had reached their breaking point. All of them had given up on him. They ran away and left Jesus to die on his own. And then they huddled together in behind locked doors, afraid that they would be next.

The point is that even if we reach our breaking point and give up on God, God does not give up on us. Just as he tracked down the disciples who abandoned him and made his peace with them – not once, not twice, but three times in John's Gospel, so he comes to us, again and again, in the assembly gathered around his Word and Sacraments, creating faith and trust in his promise of life. This faith and trust is not some optional add-on to human life that makes things a little better. It is an orientation that encompasses all of life and draws us into the life of God. It is abiding in Jesus and him abiding in us. It is "becoming what we receive," as our hymn of the day put it last week, being transformed into Christ own body for sake of the world. All we have as Christ's church are these strange, unlikely, counterintuitive promises, and the conviction that this word of God entrusted to us makes all the difference in our lives and the life of the world. Those words of the disciples at the end of our Gospel reading are our words too. It's why we sing them in our liturgy almost every Sunday. "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life."

Because when faith happens, when by the grace of God and the work of the Holy Spirit we come to trust God's promise love and forgiveness – then all of those breaking points in our lives and the lives of others get cast in a different light. They become opportunities for experiencing and sharing God's grace, God's healing, and God's reconciliation in all kinds of creative and concrete ways. So I hope we will all leave here today fed up with Jesus – fed at his table with his very self, fed to bursting with his love and forgiveness, and motivated and strengthened for our ongoing journey through our life that is now joined eternally to the life of Christ and his ongoing mission in the world. May it be so. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.