

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

Today is the fifth and last Sunday in our Bread of Life summer school course. But this isn't one of those last days of school where you don't do any work or learn anything useful. At least I hope not. Because there is more difficult stuff this week that we're going to need help making sense of. And I hope that this will prove to be one of those courses where you come out feeling like you have some command of the topic, where you come out knowing much more than when you went in.

I think that's where the disciples end up at the end of this chapter, anyway – not fully understanding what Jesus is all about, but sensing somehow that there is life to be had in these difficult words of his. Life, after all, is the point of John's Gospel. John tells us that at the end of the Gospel. The reason he wrote what he wrote, he says, was so that we who hear these words might come to trust and believe Jesus and his promises, and through trusting and believing those promises have the life that God means for us to have.

What this sixth chapter of the Gospel does for us is help us understand that the kind of life that is on offer here, 1. is difficult, 2. entails sacrifice, and 3. is worthwhile, worth enduring the difficulty and sacrifice.

First, it's difficult. It's difficult because it's counterintuitive – not what we think we want, at first anyway. Remember back at the beginning of the chapter that the reason people were looking for Jesus out here in the wilderness is because they heard he was a healer. They came to him for healing that they couldn't get anywhere else. But what they get is something else. They get a day of teaching, presumably about who Jesus is and who God is, and no doubt also who they are as human beings and how the Holy Spirit is there to help. John doesn't actually tell us what Jesus was teaching, I'm just guessing based on other parts of the Gospel. Then at the end of the day, they get fed. Jesus distributes a boy's loaves and fishes to five thousand people who eat their fill and leave twelve baskets of leftovers. So they keep following Jesus. And that's when he is able to tell them that what they want is not what they ultimately need. What they need is a different kind of bread – himself, the bread of life. What they got in the loaves and fishes was ordinary food, but also a sign, a sign that Jesus who was able to provide them with ordinary food, was also the source of heavenly food for everlasting life.

So far, so good. But then Jesus starts to go off the rails, talking about how they need to eat him. He is not just the source of heavenly bread. He *is* that bread, and they need to eat him – eat his flesh. I talked in previous weeks about how we need to connect this story to the community that it is being told in, some sixty or seventy years after Jesus' death and resurrection, how this is anti-language, insider talk alluding to the celebration of Holy Communion in John's community. What was a difficult teaching in the story, that Jesus needs to be eaten, reflects something that was also a difficult teaching for John's community, and that has continued to be a difficult teaching throughout the history of the church to our own day: the claim that bread and wine given with the promise of Christ in Holy Communion is Jesus' ongoing bodily presence with us, and for us, and within us. This shocking physical claim and promise is meant to draw us into a deeper spiritual claim and promise. What Jesus offers, in other words, is not merely a set of teachings and principles, or a moral code – things that we can use to help us “live our best life,” as people like to say, a “best life” we tend to define on our own terms, by our own criteria, with our own personal bucket lists. Jesus does not want to be kept at

arm's length like that. He wants to be consumed, to be taken into our very being, to *become* our very being.

And that leads to the second quality of this life that is on offer in Jesus. It involves sacrifice. Our first reading from Joshua this morning helps us with this idea. Joshua is drawing a line for the people of Israel as they are about to enter the promised land. They have to give something up, which is the meaning of sacrifice. They either have to give up their other gods – whether the old gods of their ancestors or the new fashionable gods they discovered in the lands they're passing through – or they can hold onto those gods and give up the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who liberated them from Egypt and fed them in the wilderness. Joshua declares his choice for himself and his household – that's the way they did things in that culture – and the rest of the people followed suit. And they lived happily ever after. Or so you might think if you only read this excerpt from Joshua.

Jesus is drawing a similar line, laying down similar alternatives. Following Jesus means not following competing voices. Trusting his promises means rejecting alternative promises. It's the reason that in our baptismal rite, and in our affirmation of baptism, we renounce the devil and all the forces that defy and rebel against God, together with the ways of sin that draw us away from God. And then we're baptized, and we celebrate like Joshua the choice we've made for our children and for ourselves, and we live happily ever after.

But of course we know that it's not that cut and dried. Not for Joshua and his people, not for Jesus' disciples, who make a similar choice at the end of our Gospel reading, and not for us. And that's where another sacrifice comes into the picture. Because it turns out that our choices and our sacrifices don't do the trick. Not on their own. Joshua and his people did not stay true to their dramatic choice in the long run. The disciples, despite Peter's bold declaration of faith here, will abandon, deny, and betray Jesus when the going gets tough. And God knows our baptismal renunciations and affirmations follow the same trajectory. It is only God's choice for us in Jesus, God's sacrifice of God's very self on our behalf, that has staying power to see us through the chances and changes of this life, as one of our prayers puts it. Jesus' cryptic words in this reading about "ascending to where he was before" are more insider language alluding not to his ascension into heaven, as we might expect, but to his being lifted up in crucifixion. This is the choice and sacrifice that makes the crucial difference (pun intended) for us and for our salvation, and it is God's choice, not ours.

This is the mystery of our faith: Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again. And all for us. Thanks be to God. But here is another mystery. This choice and sacrifice of God in Jesus Christ, conveyed to us in word and sacrament, works its way into our hearts and minds by the power of the Holy Spirit, so that Christ's sacrifice for us inspires and evokes our own sacrifices on behalf of others, and God's choice for us affects our choices for the sake of the world that we know God loves because of Jesus Christ. Peter's declaration, "we have come to believe," was not empty. It was an inspired response to Jesus' presence among the disciples. It did not convey the difficulty of the road ahead for them, but it did point to the ultimate future that Jesus' presence signals and makes possible. And so it is for us and for our declarations of faith. This life is not easy. It is not uncomplicated. But for today, for this moment, we cling to the promise that Jesus Christ has the words of eternal life, that he *is* the word of eternal life, life that is authentic and abundant, life that endures in the face of sin, death, and evil, life that is ours by God's own choice and sacrifice. You belong to Christ, dear people of God, and the peace of Christ, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.