

Sermon at PHPC - August 23, 2009 - John 6:56-69

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Here we are in the dog days of summer. It's summertime and the livin' is easy. This time of year always feels nostalgic to me. We're starting to gear up for the year - but in the mean time, we need to savor this last bit of summertime.

Several summers ago, when I was in college, I developed a friendship with a guy who, as it turned out, was an avowed atheist. One Sunday, he agreed to go to the local church with me. It was a good service. All seemed to be going well. After the service, I asked him his impression, and he said, "Well, it was okay. Good music, nice people. You know, sometimes I wish I was able to let myself believe in God and religion, because it might be nice to have something to fall back on, to rely on. You know, something...comfortable." Now, this kinda raised my hackles. I think his intentions were good. But it didn't sit well with me. And at the time, I couldn't really articulate why it bothered me, because yeah, it is nice to go and sing, and see your friends and have coffee. But when I read Gospel teachings like the one we have today, I remember why this type of sentiment doesn't really reflect the truth of Christian life.

Our Gospel reading sure doesn't take the "summertime and the living is easy" approach. No, in fact, today we have the "hard teachings" text. We encounter a community who is trying to figure out what their teacher Jesus is saying and who he is and what this means.

To put this in context - earlier in the Gospel we have the wedding at Cana, Jesus walking on water, and right before today's passage, the feeding of the 5000. The miracles that we have seen in John's Gospel are very "down-home." It's everyday people stuff. Bread, water, wine. There are no flashy signs or heavenly looking miracles here. And let's recall how there isn't even a traditional Last Supper account in the Gospel of John. Instead, the whole book is kind of a slow, constant Last Supper - each chapter is about bread and wine, about living in community and communion. It's infused with these natural and powerful images of who Jesus is.

And so when we arrive in this chapter, these fundamental elements are starting to carry new and life-giving meaning. Jesus speaks to his disciples about nourishment. He says, "I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever." This is life he's talking about - life now, and life in the world to come. This isn't any normal bread that the disciples are familiar with, and it's tough to swallow, as it were.

And so we come to the part of the text where the disciples start grumbling and murmuring - the Greek word has the connotation of "snorting." Jesus didn't conform to their image of who the Messiah would be, and his sayings about eternal life are challenging. The braver ones step out of the group of grumblers and say, "Jesus, these are hard teachings." Hard to understand, hard to follow - hard to know what this will mean for them, for the world. The teachings are hard enough that they want to hightail it out of there. And some do just that.

Jesus says to Simon Peter, "Will you also leave?" Simon Peter says, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have words of eternal life." And that's our question for today. To whom shall we go?

For Simon Peter, this question is rhetorical. He's not going anywhere. He might as well have said "duuuuh, Jesus." Simon Peter understands enough about these teachings to know that his participation in the Kingdom of God is at stake. So he's staying put. We should take note of his words. We are being asked to say them in our own voices.

The summer is a busy time in the hospital where I work as a chaplain. Kids are off from school, and we see our share of broken arms from climbing trees and other kid stuff. We also encounter some sad situations. I cared for a patient last month, who I'll never forget. Steven is a 17 year old honor student, by all accounts a good kid. Steven overdosed on a combination of alcohol and cocaine, and his friends left him passed out, unconscious at a party, thinking he was sleeping. When Steven arrived at our ICU, no one knew how long he had gone without oxygen. He was intubated; his feverish body was overwhelmed with constant mini-seizures as his brain reacted to the swelling brought on by lack of oxygen.

Steven's mother sat by his bedside, all day and night. She put cool cloths on his forehead; she smoothed his unruly dark hair. She spoke to him in that halted speech we use when we don't know if someone can really hear us. She talked to him about his friends from school and his brother who just got a job at the local pizza place. She reminded Steven that she loved him. She played Mozart and Bach on his Ipod - thinking that the music might help his brain function. She sat and waited.

The nurses called me in for support, and they asked me to see if I could do something about Steven's mother. The staff knew that her child was not going to recover fully - he would probably live, but it was unclear whether he would return back to his normal self. This was going to be a long, slow road to partial recovery at best, and Steven's mother was in for a tough journey ahead. The staff wanted her to pace herself.

So I visited with her, learning about their family, hearing about their strong faith and normalizing her grief. She could not comprehend what had happened. We prayed together; she cried. At one point, I gently reminded her that she needed to take care of herself - to eat, get some sleep, maybe take a break. She looked up at me with the unwavering, committed eyes of a loving parent, and said, "Sarah, where else am I gonna go?"

Like Simon Peter, Steven's mother knew where she was called to be. To whom, or to where, would Steven's mother go? This was it for her, the fullness of her life, and she wasn't going anywhere. To be sure, to sit with her son and see him struggle, probably blaming herself, wondering where she went wrong, in this fog of incomprehensible grief and love - what a hard teaching. But for her, to show this unconditional love for her son was the most needful thing. Like the disciples who stayed, she didn't know how this would unfold, or even how to get her mind around it. She didn't understand the medical interventions. But she knew where she

needed to be. She knew in her heart that the center of her life, her own flesh and blood, was here in this sacred space, no matter how hard it was to stay there.

Like with Simon Peter, Steven's mother believed and knew the truth of Jesus' words. Her faith helped her stay put in the midst of this difficult situation. I think it's helpful to say to ourselves, Who would we be in this text? Would we be like Simon Peter, stating that Jesus was the only person to whom we could go? I wonder sometimes if I'd be one of the grumblers. I mean, let's be honest, we all have times when we are complete grumblers, whether in our speech or our actions or lack thereof. Counter to what my college friend thought about the old easy-going, comfortable Christian life, most of Jesus' teachings are hard and absolutely uncomfortable. The teachings are, frankly, ridiculous and backwards by secular standards. My friend had the impression that it was all bunnies and bubbles and kum-ba-yah. When actually, it's a long road, sometimes a lonely one, in which we are asked to take up our crosses.

Jesus' hard teachings ask us to love our enemies, to forgive our neighbors - how many times? Seventy times seven. We are taught to humble ourselves, not to brag, not to acquire wealth, to be faithful, to visit prisons, to turn the other cheek. We try, and we sometimes succeed, but the next day, we're the ones who leave, so to speak. We'd prefer to take the easy way out, thank you very much. Forgive my friend who lied to me, or respond with kindness to my co-worker who insults me? No, thanks.

Even getting up on Sunday mornings is occasionally a challenge. I mean, where I live in New York City, the Sunday morning ritual of drinking cappuccino and reading the New York Times is pretty enticing now and then. It's practically a religion of its own. To whom shall we go? Well, we'll go to Central Park and walk the dog. Or for many of my friends who lead secular lives, this whole idea of staying committed to one faith is restrictive and outdated. It's a hard teaching to subscribe to a whole belief system and be guided by wisdom that dates back thousands of years. It's way easier to pick and choose the best parts of a few different belief systems. To whom shall we go?

Steven's older brother was rarely at the hospital. When he did show up, he'd wander around in the halls. He could barely go in the room. He was a tough mix of angry, sad and guilty. They didn't have a good relationship. He could barely forgive himself, and this guilt and fear was eating away at him. I hoped that Steven's brother would be able to voice this to someone, at least to air it out. But I fear that he built up a mighty wall between himself and those around him. My heart broke for him. I prayed that he would be able to face this and to move into a place where his brotherly love for Steven could triumph over the intense difficulty of sitting there with him. But I think his fear shut him down. So he kept wandering.

It's a hard teaching to love someone unconditionally, without fear and without getting caught up in our own emotional baggage. But Jesus asks us to stay in the midst of these places - even when we don't know exactly where we are headed, or what it means. That's what discipleship is - being in community, breaking bread together, unified in our trust that God is present. To take, to eat this bread with a faithful heart - that is the source of our lives.

We did Crop Walk every year when I was growing up, and when my brother Dave was about six or seven, he had a lot of energy. So I, at a mature ten years old, would walk with the grown-ups, and Davey with his insatiably energetic self, would walk with us for a bit, then run about 20 feet ahead, and then run back to us. Then he would run off to the side of the path and loop around a tree, and then run back, and then fling himself backwards behind us, hopping on one foot, and skip on back...on and on in these zig-zags, for the whole course. All told, he probably covered ten times more territory than we did.

I love this story. And I'd like to think that's what our faith journey looks like, sometimes. We have so much energy and curiosity. We don't want to stay on this boring, straightforward path. Certainly when we are told something that completely shakes us from our roots - something like a person being the bread of life - it's hard to stay put. Sometimes we're impatient, and we don't trust that the path we're on is the right one. Sometimes we are not interested in waiting for other slowpokes to catch up. We run off and circle a tree, and come back. (Please note that I'm not making any commentary on David's spiritual life - this is just for the purposes of illustration!).

Most of us have gone away, like the murmuring disciples, in some form or another, whether because we are distracted, or because we are afraid to stay put in the midst of hard times. But Jesus calls us to trust him, even though what he says is hard, and counter to what we may choose for ourselves. And even if we do run off, down the path of the grumblers, we need to remember that we can choose to return home.

Think of the Prodigal Son - there was the one Son who stayed, and the other Son who went off, wandered along many paths, and returned - and both of them were equally celebrated and equally loved by their Father. And remember, even Simon Peter messes things up later in the Gospel, when he denies knowing Jesus. But after that, his threefold denial is purged in his threefold declaration of love. He is welcomed home, and becomes an exemplary disciple. And this reminds us that God gives us freedom to choose how we act. God doesn't force anything on us other than his love. And when we love God back, the heavens rejoice.

Part of a mature faith is understanding why we choose this life. We choose it every day when we wake up. Hopefully not out of fear, or out of guilt, but out of love and understanding about what is at stake. We choose to stay put at the bedside of those we love. We choose every day to love God and neighbor. By grace we can do this, because we know in our hearts that these are words of eternal life.

We end up sitting at the feet of the Holy One. I pray that each time he asks us, we will know how to answer him. Lord, to whom shall we go? You have words of eternal life. Amen.