

The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost – John 6:56-69
St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Sedona Arizona

“This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?”

When Jesus started teaching the crowd of disciples about the bread of life, most were enthusiastic about his message. He attracted a crowd of more than 5,000 people, miraculously fed them with just five loaves of bread and a few fish, and ended up with baskets full of leftovers. Like Moses in the wilderness, Jesus could miraculously provide bread for his hungry followers. But the more Jesus spoke about himself being manna, the more his audience began to be skeptical about who he really was, and what he was proclaiming.

In the original manna story, God helped the Israelites escape from slavery under Pharaoh by providing safe passage through the Red Sea. As they journeyed through the wilderness, God provided a pillar of smoke by day and a pillar of fire by night to lead them toward the Promised Land. The Israelites soon became hungry and thirsty. They complained to Moses that their journey through the wilderness seemed worse than slavery because they had nothing to eat or drink. So, Moses asked God to provide food and water. Quail rained from the sky, and water came flowing out of a rock. Eventually the Israelites needed more food, so they grumbled to Moses again. Moses spoke with God, and God provided manna. This Exodus story, shared from generation to generation, gave witness to God's promise of protection, provision, and guidance. But time and again, when life became challenging, some of the Israelites questioned whether they could trust God to provide for them again. They continued to complain, and doubted whether they could always rely on God.

Now their descendants were listening to a new prophet and wondering if they could trust him and his message. While gathered in the synagogue at Capernaum, Jesus began to interpret a passage of scripture specifically about reliance on God. But this crowd wasn't so much interested in Jesus' teaching as they were in experiencing another sign that revealed his power and authority to change their everyday lives for the better. They asked Jesus to perform a sign similar to the one their ancestors experienced in the wilderness, as when God gave the Israelites bread from heaven to eat. But instead of showing the crowd more loaves of bread, Jesus continued to interpret scripture by declaring himself to be manna, the bread of life. He said, "Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh." Just as manna sustained life in the wilderness, so also Jesus would sustain their lives.

This message was difficult for the crowd to accept, especially the part about eating Jesus' flesh and drinking his blood. Although contemporary worshippers have come to interpret Jesus' words as referencing the Lord's Supper, the disciples at that time would have had no experience of the Eucharist.¹ And in John's Gospel there is no mention of the Last Supper. In this gathering, the audience most likely was confused and resistant because they took Jesus' message literally. According to the Torah, eating food with blood was forbidden because, as the life of any creature, it was sacred to God.² Jesus' followers would eventually come to understand that his flesh and blood was the source of eternal life. But for now, the crowd's misunderstanding led many to object to Jesus' teaching and abandon his ministry.

¹ Susan Hulen. *Working Preacher*, 2018. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/ordinary-21-2/commentary-on-john-656-69-3>

² Michael D. Coogan, ed. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible, NRSV augmented 3rd ed.*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press (2007), 159 NT, n. 60.

As some of the disciples turned away from Jesus, he asked the twelve “Do you also wish to go away?” This is the same question that we wrestle with as we attempt to embody discipleship on a daily basis. When the teaching is difficult, and life is challenging, will we abide in God’s love or look elsewhere for guidance, protection, and sustenance? Are we seeking Jesus for spiritual transformation, or for just another amazing sign that offers a quick fix to physical, political, or social concerns inflicted upon the multitudes by the most current regime of oppressive leaders? Abiding with Jesus through the wilderness can be a long and difficult journey. Do we abide with him, or avoid deepening our spiritual relationship? Do we accept or abandon his countercultural way of life? Like Judas and Peter, we can be tempted to betray or deny the one who has come to give us everlasting life. But in the midst of personal, political and social turmoil, fear often takes over. Choosing the abundant life that Jesus offers is hard to comprehend, accept, or even imagine, especially when we are confronted by multiple existential threats. “Our natural inclination is to turn and leave, to avoid the difficult call and above all to avoid the cross.”³

From our humble perspective, we can relate to Peter who both proclaims that Jesus has the words of eternal life, and will later deny Jesus and resist being the person Jesus is calling him to be – a faithful disciple who truly accepts that abundant life is possible; that God actually loves the whole world, including him and Judas despite their failings and imperfections. Do we embrace or resist the fact that God desires to be in relationship with all of us, and wants us to be wholeheartedly in relationship with one another? Is this teaching too much to ask?

³ Brian Peterson. *Working Preacher*, 2009.

Is it too much for us to envision given our current life circumstances? Is it this teaching difficult to accept?

The crowd that initially followed Jesus saw him as a Moses figure – one who could perform miracles and provide political victories that released them from hardship and oppression. But Jesus would not be that kind of prophet, nor would he be the kind of king the crowds were looking for. Instead, Jesus would model for them patience, compassion, mercy, and love. Jesus would teach them how to navigate the uncomfortable space between witnessing to God, questioning God’s abiding presence and concern, and altogether abandoning their faith.

As followers of Jesus, we always have the choice to be loyal disciples or merely fair-weather friends. The question, “Do you also wish to go away?” tugs at our hearts, sometimes on a daily basis. There are no easy answers. There is simply God’s abiding faithfulness, and the Spirit’s persistent guidance in leading us to live into our questions; to discuss and discern; to be attentive to God’s prompting; and to respond as faithfully as we can in that moment.

Abiding with Jesus involves ongoing commitment and re-commitment to God’s way of love. When we or someone else is wrestling with their faith, we have been blessed to have another disciple or community of believers walk alongside us as we discern the path forward – not for the sake of repeating rigid Christian doctrine, but for the sake of holy conversation and companionship through times of wondering and times of wilderness.

During wilderness times, do we turn back and abandon the teachings of Jesus, or do we rely on God to show us who our neighbors are and how to love one another? Do we succumb to cynicism and angst, or do we seek God’s guidance and grace? If we are honest about how we navigate life’s ups and down, we will answer

“Yes” on all accounts. Over the past 18 months of disruption, uncertainty, and change, we may have often “felt incapable of being wholehearted about anything, including God.”⁴ This is understandable given that we have experienced numerous cycles of fatigue and weariness while attempting to process layers of tragedy, injustice, loss, and sorrow. We’ve been challenged to stay connected with God and support one another with genuine faith, hope, and love. And just when we thought we were coming out of the pandemic, new variants began to spread alongside wildfires, earthquakes, floods, continuing economic crises, and civil unrest. Some days the only thing we could pray was, “How long, O Lord? How long?”

I don’t know about you, but to offset my weariness, anxiety, and disappointment, I have been clinging to a sense of humor and hopefulness. I have been reading wisdom shared by contemporary religious voices such as the inimitable standup comic turned pastor, Nadia Bolz-Weber. In weekly blogposts, Nadia has shared how she has been coping with life that seems to have become bombarded with crises every minute of every day. Recently she wrote about James Stockdale, a US Navy Admiral who survived 8 years as a POW in a North Vietnamese prison camp. When asked who of his fellow prisoners struggled to make it out alive, he replied:

“The optimists. Oh, they were the ones who said, ‘We’re going to be out by Christmas.’ And Christmas would come, and Christmas would go. Then they’d say, ‘We’re going to be out by Easter.’ And Easter would come, and Easter would go. And then Thanksgiving, and then it would be Christmas again. And they died of a broken heart....”⁵

⁴ Church of Scotland: *Starters for Sunday*. <https://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/worship/weekly-worship/monthly/2021-august/august-22-thirteenth-sunday-after-pentecost#sermon>

⁵ <https://thecorners.substack.com/p/the-same-damn-lesson-again>

“So, the ‘Stockdale Paradox’ is the ability to hold two opposing but equally true things at once: You must have faith that you will prevail in the end. And at the same time, you must confront the brutal facts of your current reality.”⁶

Nadia confessed that she wondered whether it is healthier to “keep acting and wishing and hoping [the pandemic] will be over soon and then having our hearts broken over and over - OR - maybe just assuming it is going to be years of this and acting accordingly. Planting gardens. Learning to cook more stuff. Meeting more neighbors. Living the life our dogs want us to live. Because then if it DOES end soon or even soon-ish, we get to be overwhelmed with joy and surprise. But if it lasts for years we are prepared (kind of) and able to live each day to the fullest possible extent . . . We can grieve our dead. We can lament, and fight and struggle. We can register our complaints. But let it all be based in a relationship with actual reality. Because actual reality is also the only place where actual joy is to be found. If joy is delayed until a preferred future comes about, we set ourselves up for despair. But if there is hope in THIS day. Joy in THIS reality. This life. This body. This heart, then certainly we can prevail. [By God’s abiding grace] We can. We will. We are.”⁷

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⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.