

“Where Would We Go?”
John 6:56-69; Joshua 24
August 26, 2018
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It was in July of 1984 and I was in the basement of the First Presbyterian Church of Ashland, Kansas. As I remember it, we were having a potluck lunch sponsored by the Presbyterian Women and talking about how many of the women might be going to the Women's Triennial Meeting the next year at Purdue University. Now the interesting thing about the lunches that PW did monthly at that church was that men were invited. They would have their business meeting, but then they would host a lunch and a program to which anyone in the church was invited. So I was sitting eating lunch next to one couple who were longtime members of our church. And he turned to me with a frown on his face and said, “We don't go to national meetings. Not since they gave money to Angela Davis.” I said, I'm sure in a wise and pastoral fashion, “Oh . . .” Because I had no idea what he was talking about. Do you remember Angela Davis? Now she is a retired professor emerita from the University of California Santa Cruz, but in the late sixties she was an author and activist and supporter of the Black Panthers, a member of the Communist Party of America, and in 1970 was arrested for conspiracy in the deaths of a judge and the three African American inmates who had taken him hostage. All were killed in a shoot out with police. She was later acquitted of all charges, but in concern of whether she would be able to get a fair trial, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church donated \$10,000 to the Angela Davis Legal Defense Fund. Fourteen years later, this couple was still angry about that. And they told me that they had nothing to do with the national church and had considered leaving the Presbyterian Church over that.

Have you ever thought about that? Have you ever thought about leaving the church? Has anything made you angry enough that you have thought about not coming to worship anymore and just joining another church? I'm sure there has. The church does lots of things that are controversial. That's part of what as Presbyterians, our General Assembly is supposed to do. It is supposed to speak truth to power,

to promote social righteousness, to speak out against injustice, to proclaim the inbreaking of God's kingdom into our world. And those are never comfortable things. And sometime we don't agree with them. And sometimes they make mistakes. And sometimes they make us mad.

But what about our local church? What about us? Do you ever get so frustrated, so mad, so annoyed, that you consider just walking away?

The part of the church building that you all are sitting in is called the nave. Architects have given all these little parts of the church interesting names. But ever since ancient times, this part has been called the nave. That comes from the Latin word “navis” meaning ship. We think that's because in Gothic cathedrals the vaulted ceiling looks like the inverted keel of a ship. Perhaps more interesting is that one of the ancient symbols representing the church is a ship or Noah's ark. That's worth thinking about.

Because if we are like a ship, or more likely Noah's ark, then like the ark, we have every type of thing you can think of here in our boat, all piled in together. We have the wild and the tame, the sleek and beautiful as well as the funny-looking. We have the catty and the piggish and the proud. We have hawks and doves. We have those who are as wise as owls and those as silly as geese, we have the innocent lambs and I'm sure we have some wolves as well. That's what the ark was like, that's what the church is like too. There's lots of growling and whining and howling and sometimes we wonder if the noise within is any better than the storm without. Sometimes it feels like a zoo here in the ark that is the church and sometimes we think it smells like one too.¹

So why do we hang on? Why do we keep coming? That's seems to be the issue before the people of Israel in Joshua's time, and the issue before the disciples in the passage we read from John.

Jesus has told the crowds that they shouldn't look for miracles, for bread from heaven like their ancestors received when they were in the wilderness. Instead, Jesus says, “I am the bread of life.”

Many felt that he had pushed the boundaries with those words. Those around him “grumbled because he said, ‘I am the bread that came down from heaven.’ They said, ‘Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph,

¹ Buechner, Frederick. *Whistling in the Dark*.

whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, 'I came down from heaven?'" But Jesus, rather than breaking off at this point, only pushed the harder. By the time Jesus had completed this exchange, the last part of which we heard again in the first verses of today's Gospel reading, when Jesus says that those who eat his flesh and drink his blood are the ones who abide in him, they've had enough. They say, "This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?" Jesus pressed the issue still harder and more intensely: "Does this offend you? What if you see the Son of Man ascend to where he was before! The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life. . . I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father." That was the last straw! "From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him." We are so attuned to these words we very likely find it hard to understand how offensive Jesus had become to his hearers by now, claiming such preposterous things. "Does this offend you?" Jesus had asked. It does indeed, they responded! These are offensive words to Jews. Drinking blood was forbidden. The law said all meat was supposed to be cooked thoroughly so there was no blood in it. Blood was life and belonged to God.

And so the real question to us is not, what has the church done to offend you, to make you think about leaving, because we're human. If you're looking for the church to be perfect or even to be right most of the time, you're going to be disappointed. Things will happen here that will make you mad, or sad, or annoyed, or tired. It's going to happen. But rather the real question is not what has the church done, but what has Jesus done? What has he said that makes you think about quitting? I might suggest that if Jesus hasn't said anything that offends you or annoys you or makes you mad, you haven't really been listening. Think about it. Pray for your enemies. Forgive everyone who asks. Give up everything you value and follow me. If your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. Judge not. Act as a loving neighbor to the one you despise.

Jesus was offensive. He was offensive to everything that people had believed about what was right to do and the ways to worship and their conceptions about God. And so people quit.

Jesus turned to the Twelve, his “chosen ones,” and asked them whether they, too, wanted to leave him. After all, if the general populace was finding him a fraud and a deceiver, out to scam them, surely those closest to Jesus must be asking something of the same question. They knew him better than any of those who had left him. So what did they think of him?

“Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.” So spoke their chief spokesman, Simon Peter. It is doubtful that they found his sayings any easier to understand or digest than those who had just left. In fact, they frequently questioned Jesus about what he meant by what he said. They surely did not respond as they did because they understood the words that much better than those abandoning Jesus. But they knew one other thing that made all the difference in the world and that made them say that he had “the words of eternal life.” That difference was this: “We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.” Those leaving had neither come to know or believe this. They were there for the bread, or for the miracles, or for the entertainment. They weren't there for Jesus to be demanding. They didn't realize that before God gives us everything in Christ, he demands of us everything. For some, that's too much. But if he is really the one, then maybe you'll take a chance and believe. For the Twelve, it was the one thing that made them stay.

In the Preface to her book *Amazing Grace*, subtitled “A Vocabulary of Faith,” Kathleen Norris tells of an evening when she was making a presentation on this “vocabulary of faith” when a question was addressed to her concerning the real value of these “words of faith.” “I don't mean to be offensive,” her questioner said, “but I just don't understand how you can get so much comfort from a religion whose

language does so much harm.” Taken aback momentarily (Ms. Norris understood the question all too well, for she had, herself, been distanced from faith and its vocabulary for many years), she struggled to respond when in a moment of inspiration it came to her that the problem lay in the word “comfort.” “I said that I didn’t think it was comfort I was seeking,” Ms. Norris said, “or comfort that I’d found. Look, I said to her, as a rush of words came to me. As far as I’m concerned, this religion has saved my life, my husband’s life, and our marriage. So it’s not comfort that I’m talking about but salvation.” (pp. 3 and 4)

I hope you come here, not because we are inoffensive, or entertaining, but because sometime, somewhere in this place, you have heard the word of Christ. In John's way of seeing, it is about eternal life, and that's something that begins here and now, not after we die. It begins as we begin to follow Christ and to love one another and to live in God's love. Where are you going to go? Who will you follow? To whom will you give everything—you loyalty, your love, your self?