

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

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Introduction

Many conflicts remain unresolved. Not everyone will accept what we want them to understand. And often we are left conflicted with a part of ourselves unable to accept what we tell ourselves is true.

As we approach this text in which some disciples turn away from Jesus' teaching while others carry on, we take a moment to breathe, to ground ourselves in the moment and to prepare ourselves for a story about choices and separation, about resignation and trust.

Text

John 6: 56–69

“Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever.” He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum.

When many of his disciples heard it, they said, “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?” But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, “Does this offend you? Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless.

The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. But among you there are some who do not believe.” For Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe, and who was the one that would betray him. And he said, “For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father.”

Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. So Jesus asked the twelve, “Do you also wish to go away?” Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.”

Comment

A difficult teaching leads many of Jesus’ followers to stop following. And who can blame them? Jesus insists that his words are spirit and life, but there’s a lot to process in a lesson about eating flesh and drinking blood and living forever. Living bread is a hard concept to swallow.

This passage gives us much to think about in terms of conflict. For one thing, Jesus doesn’t spend a lot of time trying to convince or chase after his doubters. He simply lets them go. It’s a fine lesson to remember: not every disagreement is worth pursuing; not every separation leads to tears.

And then there is the somewhat conflicted response from the remaining twelve. Jesus asks them: ‘Do you also wish to go away?’ For someone who knows so much, Jesus seems genuinely curious as to what choice these disciples will make. It must have been a sobering moment for them, watching so many turn away. Will they themselves keep at it? Will their reason lead them to the same conclusion as the deserters, or will their faith take them further down this difficult road?

Is there a note of resignation in Simon Peter’s response? ‘Lord, to whom can we go?’ One wonders if he wished he had an alternative. He might not have chosen to stick with Jesus if he thought there were another option. It would be odd if there weren’t a pause before his declaration. Rarely do we have total clarity when it comes to the big decisions in our lives. Happy are those who are free from doubt and accept far out ideas with little hesitation. For those with both faith and brains, the struggle is real.

We note that Simon Peter doesn’t sound particularly convinced by Jesus’ argument. None of the twelve are nodding their heads saying, ‘Yep! Living bread. That makes a lot of sense.’ No. Instead of basing their decision to continue on the merits of the case, the twelve disciples are convinced by the merit of the man. Jesus is worthy of their trust.

As difficult as Jesus' teaching may be, these twelve can't shake the feeling that his are 'the words of eternal life'. There's something here we can't quite explain, but can't deny is right. 'We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God.' Simon Peter leads with his gut. He doesn't give a robust defense of Jesus' argument; he resigns himself to the fact that he just believes.

Sometimes, conflicts are totally rational. Often, they are messier than that -- and being honest about our emotional and illogical conclusions can help to clarify where we need to separate ourselves from others and where we can trust our choices are right for us even if they're not for everyone.

Response

Think about irrational decisions you've made. Were they always wrong?

Were the happy pursuits you stuck with based on irrefutable logic, or were they tied up with personal connections and an enduring trust in a relationship that withstood episodes of faulty thinking?

We've become more aware in recent years about the surprising weakness of facts to win arguments and change minds. Emotions are what rule us. If we're not getting anywhere in transforming a conflict through logic and reason, we might work instead on building better relationships and earning trust. That will always be a persuasive force.

Prayer

Holy One of God,
we struggle to make sense
of this life and its choices.
We want to do what's right
but nothing gives us
the answer.
Help us to let go
of right and wrong,
yes or no,
and let us to choose instead
relationships of trust
and words that won't stop the discussion
but assure us of your eternal life.
Amen.

Season: Ordinary time

Themes: Conflict Skills