

Pentecost 12 / August 15, 2021

John 6:67

“Jesus said to the Twelve, ‘Do you want to go away as well?’”

Are you a decisive person? Do you make your mind up quickly and move on, without being haunted by second thoughts? The time for decision had come for Jesus’ disciples. Jesus’ conversation with the people who came to Him for more bread was deeply disturbing and eye opening! He claimed to be the bread from heaven, who gives life to the world. He said, “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me will not hunger and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.” He said His flesh was true food and His blood was true drink. He said, whoever ate His body and drank His blood, would have eternal life. The bread seekers were aghast! They weren’t cannibals! They didn’t want that course on their menu. Incredulously they asked, “How can this man give us His flesh to eat?” Jesus’ words also affected His disciples. They said, “This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?” Jesus’ words affected them so greatly that John says, “After this many of His disciples turned back and no longer walked with Him.” You know the song, “I have decided to follow Jesus?” They decided not to follow Jesus.

Jesus looked at the twelve and asked them, “Do you want to go away as well?” This was their time for decision. When Jesus called them, they followed instantly and immediately. Because Jesus had chosen them, their only choice was not to follow Him. Jesus said, “You did not choose me, but I chose you!” He chose them and called them, even as He has called and chosen us to follow Him. They followed, but now it was time to decide if they wanted to continue to follow Him! The world, the devil and our own sinful nature, give us many opportunities to decide if we want to follow Jesus, or turn away to something else. Perhaps we even turn away at times. But Jesus is faithful. He calls us continually through the gospel. He gives us the Holy Spirit to draw us back. He gives us faith to say with Peter, “Lord to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life and we know and have come to believe that you are the Holy One of God.”

Jesus’ conversation with the people in our gospel was provocative, to say the least. He challenged them from the start, stating that they came to Him not because they had seen the miracle and believed, but because they were hungry again. He spoke with them, but His real audience were His own disciples. His words shocked and confused the remnant of the crowd, but they were meant to challenge His disciples understanding and bring them to a point of decision. He wanted them to stop and consider the nature of His being, the nature of His kingdom and their own reasons for following Him. Why do we follow Jesus? What does it mean to follow Him? Where is He leading us? Jesus wants us to follow Him, but we can only follow Him, when we believe deeply and from the heart that He is the Holy One of God and that He has the words of eternal life.

On the surface His words sound insane. He says, “Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life...” We spiritualize His words from the vantage point of time so they sound less shocking, but Jesus’ intent was to shock His hearers. His words were shocking and not just because of cannibalistic undertones. They grated against the words of Moses and the Prophets. The children of Israel were strictly forbidden by God from eating flesh with blood in it and from drinking blood.

Unless our family name is Dracula, we might wonder who would want to do such a thing in the first place? But repugnant as it sounds, the ritual drinking of blood was a common aspect of pagan worship in Old Testament times. People believed the power of life was in the blood and that they could internalize that power by drinking the life blood. Israel was forbidden to drink blood or to eat meat with blood in it, out of respect for God, who put the power of life in the blood.

The power of life is in blood and Israel was to respect life in humans and in animals. The power of atonement for sin is in the sacrifice of blood. Blood was only to be used by the priests in Israel to offer sacrifices for the forgiveness of sin. In Leviticus 17, God said, “For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you on the altar to make atonement for your souls, for it is the blood that makes atonement by the life. Therefore, I have said to the people of Israel, no person among you shall eat blood, neither shall any stranger who sojourns among you eat blood.” Jesus doesn’t call us to eat His flesh and drink His blood as cannibals. But there is something very important about Jesus’ body and blood that we need to understand and believe. First, we need to understand He offered His body and shed His blood for the atonement of human sin! Second, we need to believe our sin is forgiven when we appropriate Him into ourselves through faith, as the Holy One of God. He really meant it when He said, “My flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink.” He is the living bread from heaven,

who gave his flesh for the life of the world that whoever feeds on Him through faith, may have eternal life. We follow Him as the one who has the words of eternal life!

We eat His flesh and receive nourishment from His blood, not as cannibals, but by receiving Him as Saviour and believing His words of forgiveness and life. He has the words of eternal life! His words give us eternal life, because He earned our forgiveness by offering His flesh and shedding His blood on the cross. St. John wrote in his first letter, "He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world." The most important word is the gospel of forgiveness; heard with our ears and read with our eyes. Jesus calls us to Himself through the gospel of forgiveness and through that word, He feeds our faith and gives us eternal life.

St. Paul said, "Faith comes through hearing and hearing through the word of Christ." Peter may not have understood everything Jesus said, but He was on the mark when he said Jesus has the words of eternal life. Jesus is the word of life. In the prologue of his gospel St. John wrote, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God...all things were made through Him." It is most important for us to listen to His words, even as Mary, the sister of Lazarus and Martha, sat at His feet and listened to Him, counting His words of the greatest value. He has the words of eternal life!

It is important to speak His words to each other, to encourage one another in faith and stir one another up to faithfulness. As St. Paul said in the letter to the Ephesians, "addressing one another in psalms, hymns and spiritual songs." It is important to remember His words spoken in our baptism: the forgiveness of sins, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, the power to walk in newness of life and the promise of sharing in His resurrection to eternal life. It is important to receive the nourishment of His word through the gift of His body and blood in Holy Communion, under the forms of bread and wine. Jesus' words come to us in various ways, because God is rich in mercy. Jesus is the bread of life! Jesus has the words of eternal life! We receive Him, the bread of life, through His word. Through His word He calls us to follow Him in faith and faithfulness. By His word He forgives our sins, nourishes our faith, gives it growth and preserves it, so that it may be fulfilled in our share of His resurrection to eternal life.

Do you have faith? Do you want to follow Jesus? Thank God if you say yes! Faith is the first gift and the greatest miracle of God. Faith is God's work in the human heart, from beginning to fulfilment in eternal life. Earlier in this gospel, Jesus said, "This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent." Faith is the work of God, by which faith germinates in the human heart, grows and is brought to the harvest of eternal life. Faith in the human heart is God's greatest miracle. Parting the sea, calming a storm and walking on the water are child's play compared to the miracle of faith in the human heart. The elements of nature respond to God's word instantly and obey without resistance. The human heart fights back tooth and nail. God's word is stronger than the human heart. Praise God for the word and working of the Holy Spirit who opens our hearts to receive Jesus as Saviour, gives us faith to believe and who opens our lips to say with Peter, "Lord to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we know and have come to believe that you are the Holy One of God?" In Jesus' Name. Amen