

Text – John 6:56-69 Theme: “Nowhere Else to Turn”

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Some of the most amusing things you can find in a newspaper are located not in the comics, but in the news section. Here’s a true story reported out of Fayetteville, North Carolina, some years ago:

“A twenty-year-old woman says she was tied up and forced to go to church Sunday, according to a Cumberland County sheriff’s report. Georgiana McRay of Melody Lane told deputies that someone she knows removed her from her home and “proceeded to take her to church against her will,” the report said.

Once she was there, Ms. McRay contacted a relative, who took her home again. The report says Ms. McRay has swollen wrists and legs. The name of the church was not mentioned in the report. A detective is investigating.”

It’s stories like this that give evangelism a bad name. Of course, in many people’s book, evangelism already has a bad name. Dr. Ben Johnson, who taught evangelism at Columbia Theological Seminary in Atlanta, once told this story from his own experience:

He was at a church conference, and was speaking with a woman he’d just met. He introduced himself as a Presbyterian seminary professor. The woman seemed interested to hear this.

She immediately brightened up and asked, “What is it you teach?” “Evangelism,” he told her. “Oh,” she said, “and I thought you were such a nice man!” “Evangelism” is not a word with which many people today feel terribly comfortable. Some would even say it seems to belong more to the world of “holy rollers” than to our own.

Yet perhaps one reason why so many churches are gradually losing members is because we’re so shy about that word, and all for which it stands. The Christian faith is made to be given away; but so many times what do we do? We try to bottle it up within us.

It’s kind of like catching fireflies -- some of us may remember doing that when we were kids. I remember catching fireflies in a large jar, then poking holes in the lid with an ice-pick. I would place the jar on my bookshelf before I went to bed, and I went to sleep with visions of fireflies dancing in my head.

Yet invariably when I awoke -- you know what sight greeted me – the fireflies had all died – every last one. Fireflies aren’t made to be kept in jars. They’re meant to fly free. It’s the same with the word of God, the good news of Jesus Christ. You’ve got to release it, to allow it to fly free, if you are to experience it in all its wonder.

There was a time in Jesus’ life when his own disciples seemed to be hiding away the word he was teaching, because they were ashamed.

Jesus had put it strongly when he taught in the Capernaum synagogue, as recorded in the verses right before our reading for today: “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink” (John 6:54-55).

To faithful Jews, those words sounded blasphemous, if not cannibalistic! Remember the Jews were a people who practiced strict dietary laws – and one of the strongest prohibitions in Jewish law has to do with the drinking of blood.

“Well, Jesus wants them to see something beyond the bread and wine,” you might say. Of course; he’s in the process of establishing what will become the Sacrament of Holy Communion. Yet the very fact that he’d use such words at all seems, to many of his most devout followers, like the most stinging insult imaginable.

“This teaching is difficult,” his disciples admit – and those are his friends speaking! (John doesn’t record the words of his enemies.) But what John does tell us is that many who counted themselves as Jesus’ friends abandon him when he places before them in such stark terms the demands of the Gospel:

“Because of this,” John says, “many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him” (John 6:66). This must have been one of the low points of Jesus’ ministry.

He turns to his closest friends, the Twelve, and asks them, “Do you also wish to go away?” (John 6:67).

Here we have a side of Jesus we rarely see. The abrupt departure of so many of his followers has perhaps startled if not shocked him. He may be wondering if they will all abandon him. He may wonder if this bold journey through the land, teaching and preaching and sharing the wonders of God’s love, is doomed.

But it’s Simon Peter – the one whom we may associate with weakness and denial – who does not deny Jesus now. Peter replies, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life” (John 6:68).

It’s easy to forget in this free society of ours, where the practice of religion is protected as a constitutional right, and where Christianity seems, at times, almost a state religion, that being a Christian is a choice.

“God has no grandchildren,” says Donald Bloesch, “since one [can only be] adopted into God’s family by faith in Jesus Christ, and faith cannot be passed from one generation to another.”

No, faith cannot be bequeathed to our descendants. Faith is a response, a response to the Holy Spirit that must be made anew, by each person, by each generation in its turn. Those of us who are parents cannot assume that our children will grow up Christian, just because we are.

Somewhere, somehow, somebody must sit them down and tell them – with a gleam in the eye, and maybe even a catch in the voice – about Jesus Christ. It must be someone they love and respect, someone who shows them by example that following him is the most important thing in the world.

The English painter J.M.W. Turner once sold one of his immense canvases to a close friend, who invited him to his home to help hang it. Though the room was spacious and airy, try as they might, the painter and the collector just couldn't get that painting to look right.

Finally, Turner, the artist, turned to his friend and declared it was a useless enterprise. There was only one solution, he said: The room would have to be rebuilt to fit the painting.

There are likely some who come to church hoping to bring home just a little bit of Jesus to adorn their lives, inspirational thoughts to hang, as a pretty picture, on the wall of their existence – but Jesus Christ can never be mere decoration for a human life. No, he's got to be at the center of it, the focal point from which everything else derives its purpose.

Faith is a gift – a gift that cries out for a response. There comes a time – perhaps many times – in the life of a Christian, when a response is necessary;

when all around us, would-be disciples are “turning back and no longer going about with him” and you and I find ourselves alone. “Do you also wish to go away?” Jesus asks.

What will we say? Will we hang our heads and look down at the ground, then turn and shuffle off like so many others? Or will we have the faith to look Christ in the eye and answer, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life” (John 6:68).

A story from the Arabic tradition reminds us of what it's like to rely on God completely. A seeker once challenged the famous Imam Sadiq, “Convince me of the existence of God.”

Knowing that the man had traveled the seas, the Imam asked him, “Have you ever been caught in a fierce storm in the middle of a voyage, your rudder gone, your sails torn, your vessel in danger of capsizing, and no land in sight?”

The man replied, “Yes.” The Imam then asked him, “Yet was not there always, despite your despair, a glimmer of hope still in your heart that someone, somewhere – some unnamed and unknown power – could still save you?” “Yes,” the man answered again. To which the Imam replied, “That power is God.”

“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” (John 6:68-69). Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus forever. Amen.

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