

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

COMING TO BELIEVE

John 6:56-69

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Analysis by Lori A. Cornell

56Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. 57Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. 58This 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.” 59He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum.

60When many of his disciples heard it, they said, “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?” 61But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, “Does this offend you? 62Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? 63It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. 64But 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. 65And he said, “For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father.”

66Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. 67So Jesus asked the twelve, “Do you also wish to go away?” 68Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. 69We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.”

DIAGNOSIS: Not Getting It

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Wishing for Less Difficult Teachings*>

Jesus has been talking with the crowd for a long time about bread from heaven by the time he has this encounter with his disciples alone. “This teaching [about eating flesh] is difficult” (v. 60), they say to him (which apparently is true, given that the hordes who have been following him now decide to turn back). All Jesus’ talk about flesh-eating is not only difficult to understand, but downright gruesome. Couldn’t he come up with some more appetizing way to sell himself to the crowd? Couldn’t he lure them with pastoral images of shepherds and sheep (not pretty in reality, but better than this!)? Jesus doesn’t seem to know how to appeal to the crowd. And now he’s losing some of his potential converts. So the disciples beg for some more palatable metaphor.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Wishing to Go Away*

The question is whether Jesus is willing to give the crowd what they want. And, given the resigned question he asks the disciples, it appears he’s not particularly set on pleasing his audience: “Do you also wish to go away?” he asks (v. 67). Jesus, who anticipates giving himself wholly for the world, finds his listeners wriggling in discomfort at his proposal-unable to hear his promises through their desire for decorum. Or is the problem that they just don’t think they need someone else to provide their meals for them? (Now that their bellies are full from the bread and fish Jesus provided, they can linger on the illusion that they are self-sufficient.) In either case, a gap has opened between Jesus and his audience. It is the chasm of unfaith.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Turning Back*

The god we want is not the God we get in Jesus, so John tells us throughout this “Bread of Life” chapter. The God we get is the one who sacrifices his fleshy body, accepts human judgment, dies embarrassingly. This whole portrait of God is counterintuitive. But be that as it may, this is the kind of God Jesus offers to be for us. And when people turn their backs on such an offer, they don’t get what he gives: eternal life. To turn your back on Jesus is to put God behind you; it means you are turning your back on eternity.

PROGNOSIS: Getting It (Because It’s Given)

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Coming to Give Eternal Life*

But, as much as we might deserve for God to turn his back on us, in Jesus God does not. Instead, Jesus persists in his offer: My flesh and blood for you, he says. Eternal life, the gift that doesn’t end. And sure enough on the cross he puts his whole self into his promise. And the Father vindicates his love for the world with the gift of eternal life-which Jesus isn’t satisfied to keep to himself, so he gives it out lavishly. Every empty hand he fills with his flesh and blood, in order to give “useless flesh” (v. 63) new purpose.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Coming to Believe*

Perhaps Peter had some inkling that Jesus could give useless flesh purpose, when he spoke those words that trumped the crowd’s rejection: “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life” (v. 68). Maybe in remaining by Jesus’ side, rather than turning back (remember, he didn’t know where else to go), Peter realized that Jesus’ difficult words might be hard to accept, but they nevertheless give life. “We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God,” he

professes to Jesus (v. 69). Abiding with Jesus makes it possible for us to accept the difficult-not only difficult sayings, but circumstances too-and yet trust that Christ is there through it all.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Coming to the Crowds Again*

So what do we believers do with Jesus' words? Do we soften them? Reduce them to metaphors and similes? Or do we "accept" in faith Christ's difficult teachings, and trust that we can simply unleash the word on its hearers, because Christ plans for those words to bring eternal life? Having come to believe that Jesus has the words of eternal life, we simply release them; we surrender his word into the world with all its power, knowing that it's not our flesh that gives that word purpose, but the Spirit who gives life (v. 63).