

Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18; John 6:56-59
Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost; August 26, 2018
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This is our third and final week looking at the section of John's gospel where Jesus calls himself the Bread of Life. Today, we reach the climax of his teaching, which (like the reading from Joshua) demands a commitment from his followers.

Last week, Jesus' opponents objected when he talked about giving them his flesh to eat and his blood to drink. This week, his followers have to decide for themselves whether they can hang in there with him or whether his claims are just too much.

From John's gospel, listen to what the Spirit is saying to the church.

[read text]

Imagine, for a moment, how today's readings might be heard by someone who has never been to church. Joshua calls the people to make a critical choice about whom they will serve. Jesus tell his followers they must eat his flesh and drink his blood to receive the life he offers, claiming that it is only through him that they can have a relationship with God. Not exactly warm and fuzzy, is it?

Imagine how a person new to the faith would hear that.

If you are the kind of person for whom Sunday has always started with church, you might find it hard to put yourself in that person's shoes. You can't remember a time when you weren't in the pew every Sunday. You go because that's what was expected of you as a child and it's what you've always done.

If you left the church in high school or college, you might have an easier time imagining the new person's response, especially if you left because of something that offended you.

The pastor preached monogamy, but he was forced to leave the church when his affair with the organist was revealed. Or maybe he preached about loving your neighbor but used the N word in private.

You are probably very sensitive to newcomers and don't want to do or say anything that might turn them off.

If you joined the church because something was missing in your life, you might be looking for a challenge. Maybe you've had to wrestle with whether you want to hang with folks who sometimes act more like a club than people who follow Jesus.

Maybe you relate to all of these perspectives or maybe none at all.

Imagine, for a moment, that this new person is looking to connect with God and with others. He's looking for a way to be part of something bigger than himself, something that makes a difference in the world.

She wants to know more about this Jesus guy and why he seems to have simultaneously attracted so many amazing people on the one hand and so many jerks on the other. What does this guy want from us and am I willing to give it a try?

I'm guessing there were a lot of folks in the synagogue like us that day who were listening to Jesus and asking the same questions of themselves. And not everyone responded the same way. Some got angry. Some doubted. Some were curious. Some were incredulous. Some wanted to know more. And even a few of them believed.

There a lot of reasons you might come to church: you have friends here, you feel welcome here, you like the music, you enjoy the sermons, you want to be associated with a group that makes a positive difference in the community, or you look forward to hearing what the children will say during the Time with Young Disciples.

You name it – there are probably as many reasons as there are people here. And, like some of the people responded to Jesus, we don't always leave liking what we heard or experienced.

I saw a quote on Facebook last week that got right to the heart of the matter. On the way out the door after worship, one churchgoer said to the pastor, "I didn't really like worship today." And without missing a beat, the pastor responded, "That's okay. We weren't worshipping you."

Jesus is all over this in his teaching. He is crystal clear, sometimes to the point of being obnoxious, that God and only God is worthy of our loyalty. And the only way to God is through him. Not liking what they heard, the religious leaders were the first to file out of the synagogue in protest.

Next some of his followers speak up, "This is hard stuff, Jesus. Who can accept it?"

"Why? Does what I'm saying offend you, too? Jesus asks. I know some of you do not believe. Now some of his followers decide to leave. They have stuck with him as long as they could, but his teaching is just too much to take.

Turning then to his closest disciples, Jesus asks, "Are you going to leave, too?" "But," Peter asks, "to whom else can we go? You have the words of eternal life."

Now, you can hear that response one of two ways: as a statement of resignation: what choice do we have? Or as a statement of commitment. Why would we go to anyone else?

I like to think the folks who remain committed to Jesus recognized the challenge but knew that Jesus offered the kind of life they longed for. Maybe they are the same people the church has long sought and often failed to attract.

Speaking of his own rocky relationship with the church, Chris Chiakulas writes,

Those of us that are amenable to the idea of joining a congregation want it to mean something. We want more than just a group of people to sing songs and hold hands with

[We] are not interested in a celestial Jesus with a permanent smile and open arms, unconcerned with the goings-on of planet Earth. We've heard about that Jesus our entire lives, and we're not buying it.

Do you know what we would buy? Jesus the man, Jesus the prophet, the Jesus that fashioned a whip of cords and overturned the tables of the money changers for making God's house a den of robbers. The Jesus that challenged the establishment and paid the ultimate price. The Jesus that took up the cross of the poor, the weak, and the marginalized in the name of God.

I spent an hour and a half at church one week and the name "Jesus" was not mentioned a single time. That is what ultimately made me decide to give up.

What I and people my age are looking for is a church that preaches not just transcendental love, but that *prophetic fire* that makes Jesus so appealing.

A church that stressed this aspect of the faith would be dangerous, to be sure. It would be time-consuming and divisive. It might not even work as a long-lasting denomination. But the inconvenient truth is that if you really want [people like us] back in the pews, you've got to light the church on fire.¹

There have been those, throughout history, who sought to light the church on fire. Take the efforts of Reformed theologian Karl Barth, who taught at the University of Bonn

¹ https://www.huffingtonpost.com/christian-chiakulas/churches-millennials-if-they-just-did-this_b_8215846.html

during the 1930s, just before Adolf Hitler became Chancellor of Germany. The political situation in Germany had become untenable for Barth, who described it, “like sitting in a car which is driven by a man who is either incompetent or drunk”.²

Seeking a way to proclaim the superiority of the gospel over the competing ideology of National Socialism, Barth helped establish the Confessing Church movement, which reclaimed the first commandment prohibition against other gods.³

Echoing the words of Joshua’s call to choose whom you will serve and Jesus’ claim that there was no other way to God except through him, the confessing church rejected the idea that it would have to acknowledge any “event, power, figure or truth” other than the God revealed in Jesus Christ.

Like the confessing church movement of the 1930s, there continue to be church leaders who seek to light up the church by publicly renewing their commitment to the gospel. In a recent statement addressing the changing ideology of the U.S., the authors claim that

It is time to be followers of Jesus before anything else – nationality, political party, race, ethnicity, gender, geography....

The church is always subject to temptations to power, to cultural conformity, and to racial, class, and gender divides ...

The best response to our political, material, cultural, racial, or national idolatries is the First Commandment: “You shall have no other gods before me”.⁴

Every January, we renew our commitment to the gospel publicly when we renew our baptismal vows. Putting our trust in God, we promise to turn continually from the ways of sin and renounce evil and its power in the world. We promise to turn continually to Jesus instead, claiming his authority over our lives as Lord and Savior. We promise to be Christ’s faithful disciples, obeying his word and showing his love.

In doing so, we recommit ourselves to love and serve God, forsaking “the temptations of compromise with the great wealth, powers and fears to which so many people and nations bow today.

The promises we are asked to make are awesome and difficult. For some people, they are too difficult to make.

² Charles Raynal, “Theological Perspective on Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18 in *Feasting on the Word* Year B, Vol. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), p. 364.

³ *Ibid*, p. 366.

⁴ “Reclaiming Jesus: A Confession of Faith in a Time of Crisis” at <http://www.reclaimingjesus.org/>.

But we are not asked to do this on our own. With every call to faith and every call to light up the church, Jesus also says, “Do not fear. I am with you.” “Do not be afraid. I will be with you. “

Thanks be to God!