

## AFTER THE HARD PART COMES THE HARDER PART

Joshua 24:1-2, 14-24

John 6:56-69

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TEXT: John 6:67-68 “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.’”

PURPOSE: To invite us to recognize and embrace the grace which we experience when we persevere through the challenges involved in choosing to follow Jesus.

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This morning, I want to explore the two stories we just heard from the Book of Joshua in the Old Testament and the Gospel of John in the New Testament. In the passage from the Book of Joshua, Joshua challenged the people of Israel to serve only the God who brought them out of slavery and into the Promised Land. In the passage from the Gospel of John, Jesus’ followers chose to stay with him or to leave after they heard him invite his followers to eat his body and drink his blood.

Let me tell you ahead of time where I’m going with this. After getting through something hard – in Joshua, conquering the current residents of Canaan to make room for Israel; and in John, coming to terms with the rather disturbing image of eating Jesus’ flesh and drinking his blood – the faithful in both accounts face an even greater challenge, something much harder. Going from hard to harder is not what anyone wants about anything. I suspect most of us would be relieved to get on that “big, broad, easy road” about which Joni Tada warns us in today’s reflection in our bulletin. Where I’m ultimately heading is looking for what good news can be found in going from a hard time to a harder time, at least in the journey of faith.

The Book of Joshua recounts the conquest of the people living on the land God promised God’s people. I personally find this conquest to be quite offensive. That grisly story is being played out again on that same piece of land, as the nation of Israel makes life harder and harder for the Palestinian people who also know that land as their home. Whatever my or your opinions about modern day Israel and Palestine, the Biblical account warns Israel that the conquest is easier than what comes next, which is the challenge of sustaining wholehearted devotion to God.

The passage we heard today, which took place after “the Lord had given rest to Israel from all their enemies all around,” (Joshua 23:1) recounts an almost comic back-and-forth between Joshua and the gathered community. Here’s the short version of that conversation:

**Joshua:** “Choose who you will serve, either the God who brought us out of Egypt and gave us this land, or some other gods, local or foreign.”

**The people:** “We choose the Lord the God who already has done great things for

us.”

**Joshua:** “Actually, you aren’t able. You will give in to the temptation to serve other gods.”

**The people:** “Oh, yes we can.”

**Joshua:** “Are you sure? Really sure?”

**The people:** “Yep. We have no doubts about our allegiance.”

**Joshua:** “Then show it.

I know you’ve been playing around with a few of those foreign gods. Get rid of them!”

**The people:** “The Lord our God we will serve, and him we will obey.”

Why is this such a big deal? Because those other gods offer more immediate rewards. Those other gods are much more obvious than the invisible, inscrutable true God. Those other gods aren’t as ‘jealous’ as the Lord. Those other gods don’t require righteousness and obedience as well as sacrifice.

The story that continues in the next book in the Bible, called “Judges,” describes the people doing exactly what Joshua predicted. By the second chapter of that book, the Israelites had abandoned God and were worshiping the gods of the people whom they had beat in battle. (Judges 2:11ff) So, after the very hard work of military action to establish Israel’s possession of the land, the challenge of sustaining covenant loyalty to the Lord turned out to be an even harder undertaking.

Fast forward to the time of Jesus and the Gospel of John. Today’s passage from John’s Gospel is the last section of a long account which started with the feeding of the five thousand, and continued with a dialogue between Jesus and the people who had eaten some of that bread. John used that conversation to explore the deeper meaning of the miracle and to present Jesus as the “bread of life.” In today’s passage, Jesus spoke of eating his flesh and drinking his blood as the way to have real life. The eating and drinking points to the the sacrament of Holy Communion. But eating human flesh and drinking human blood is a rather gory image. In fact, it was so disturbing that some of his followers called it a ‘hard saying,’ an unacceptable teaching. In response, Jesus said, “So you think that’s unacceptable? What would you say if you saw me ascend into heaven?” In other words, if you can’t accept what takes place when you share communion, there’s no way you could make it past the cross.

Back in the 1960's, I was part of a group of teenagers who produced folk services in a number of churches in my home town. We used a paperback hymnal which came from a Catholic publisher, because Catholics, following the reforms of Vatican II, were ahead of Protestants as far as composing Christian folk music. A songwriter named Ray Repp wrote many of the songs in that hymnal. The chorus of one of the songs, titled "Sons of God," had these very Catholic lyrics:

"Sons of God, hear his holy word, Gather round the table of the Lord.  
Eat his body, drink his blood, And we'll sing a song of love."

We liked the song, but we thought those words were gross. So we rewrote them, replacing "Sons of God" with "children, come," and replacing the eating and drinking line with "sing out people, joyfully, for this meal will make us free." Little did we know that some of Jesus' first disciples agreed with us.

Like many texts in John's Gospel, the bread of life discourse holds many meanings, but they all have to do with accepting Jesus as the sole source of real life, life which, earlier in the dialogue, Jesus called "eternal life." Contrary to our popular understanding, "eternal life" doesn't start after we die. Eternal life, according to Jesus, begins when we believe that God sent Jesus. (John 6:47) Accepting the necessity of ingesting Jesus in order to share his life is hard. But believing in Jesus inevitably gets harder, all the way to his crucifixion. If there were people who stopped "going about with him" because he insisted on believers eating his flesh and drinking his blood, how many more would find it intolerable to be the disciple of a crucified criminal?

Going from hard to harder with Jesus is the same as going from hard to harder with Israel after they had taken possession of the land. There is a way of looking at our circumstances right now which also feels like we're going from hard to harder. It's definitely going on in lots of ways in the wider world, from deadly storms and severe drought to even more deadly storms and wildfires, to getting through the hard times of the pandemic and now find ourselves facing the harder times of dealing with the far more dangerous delta variant of the coronavirus. I think especially of the people of Haiti, who first experienced political chaos after their president was assassinated last month, and then experienced a deadly earthquake, and then had a massive tropical storm overwhelm the country, all while the virus was running amok among the people.

But I want to look at this movement from hard to harder in our journey of faith. Many churches, including ours, have found our way through the hard times of the pandemic. We've masked and distanced and zoomed and succeeded in not being a place where the virus was transmitted. We would like it if we've already handled the most difficult challenges. But the challenge of following Jesus in this current phase of the pandemic seems to be getting harder, not easier. This congregation, like so many others, has fewer people participating in worship, fewer programs to support the strengthening of our faith, and less energy for experimenting with new ways to be church. Faith itself feels like it's getting harder to sustain, harder to nourish, harder to access as we seek to live as Jesus would have us live.

So where is the good news in all this? Where's the good news for God's fickle people, who are good at making promises but not good at keeping them? Where's the good news for Jesus' fair weather followers who want discipleship without a cross? Where's the good news for us, who want to be faithful but are worn out from getting through one challenge only to face even more difficult challenges?

Here's the good news as I see it: In the story about some of Jesus' followers dropping out because what Jesus was saying about himself was more than they could handle, Jesus turned to the twelve, that innermost circle of his followers, and asked, "What about you? Do you also wish to go away?" That moment in Jesus' relationship with his disciples is one of the most poignant moments in the entire gospel story. He had just watched some, perhaps many, of the people purporting to be his disciples deciding not to keep following him. Notice that he didn't dilute his message in order to get them back on board. But that's not to suggest that their departure didn't distress him. Now, there's just this inner circle of followers left. When Jesus asked them if they were going to stay or go, I'm pretty sure he didn't know how they were going to answer. They all could have said, Jesus, you're really pretty special. But being with you is getting a bit too weird. This eating your flesh and drinking your blood business is going too far for us. We think we all need a break, including you, and we hope you'll figure out a way to tone down your message, to make yourself a little more marketable to the average person.

But that's not what they said. Peter, speaking for all of them, said, "Lord, to

whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.” In other words, they were realizing that, no matter how strange Jesus’ message sounded, his words described the only way to the new life their souls craved. Sure, they could drop out. But then what? Hook up with some would-be Messiah whose message was more palatable, but who they knew did not know the way to the life Jesus wanted to share with them? If any of us found ourselves in a life-or-death situation, and we found out that there was only one possible way to survive, would we base our decision to go that way on whether it might be too hard? Think of our allies in Afghanistan: they are realizing that their only chance for safety is to get to the airport in Kabul and get on one of those planes. Do you think they’re questioning whether getting there might be harder than they can handle? No way. They’re just doing what they know they need to do to increase their chances of surviving.

The good news is, Jesus has the words of eternal life, and those words show the way to live that life. The good news is, through his gift of himself, his flesh and blood self, he has made it possible for us to share the life that he lives, life which is no longer subject to death. Choosing to accept that life necessarily involves hardship, but if his way is the only sure way, there is no reason to calculate its degree of difficulty. Just do it. Just follow.