

“What Keeps Us”

Reading: Ephesians 6:10-20; John 6:56-69

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Our sermon for today is going to be a little more autobiographical than usual. One of the reasons we read Scripture all the time in our worship is because of the ways those stories from the past so often mirror our own stories. Everyone's story is unique, of course, but at the same time we can often see bits of ourselves in those ancient stories. We are often not the first to tread the paths of our spiritual journeys, and it can be helpful to read the stories of those who have gone before us for guidance and wisdom. So as we read this story today from the gospel according to John in which people are forced to decide whether they are really committed to following Jesus or not, it's a story that strikes close to home for me. And not just me, of course, but for many people, because many if not most of us go through at least one of those times of a crisis of faith. My story is far from unique. Many of you have heard some or all of my story before, but I hope that sharing it again will spark some thoughts about your story and where you are on that path.

I grew up going to church pretty regularly with my family. We attended a vibrant Wesleyan church in the town in northeast Indiana where I grew up, and when I was at a Wesleyan youth convention as a freshman in high school, I felt that God was calling me into pastoral ministry in a very difficult-to-describe moment. It was something I've never felt before or since. And at the time, it was certainly a significant moment, but I didn't really question it. I didn't really know who I was yet, so I just sort of accepted that, well, God wanted me to be a pastor. It wasn't until a couple years later that I started realizing that I loved things like chemistry and physics and math, which, believe it or not, are not the sort of subjects that are needed on a daily basis as a pastor.

So I went to college and majored in both Christian ministry and chemistry, not because I wanted a backup plan in case ministry didn't work out, but because I honestly enjoyed chemistry that much. But the unpleasant truth is that a scientific-minded introvert like me can be the odd man out in a field that all too often is dominated by charisma and personality. I remember in one of my very first chemistry labs in college, the professor had everyone in the class introduce themselves and tell everyone what their major was, and when I told everyone that my majors were Christian Ministries and chemistry, every looked at me and laughed. It was an experience that sums up a lot of my time in college: it always seemed a little ridiculous that I was a chemist at heart in a religion degree program.

I prepared for ministry and did my best in my classes, but I was there mostly because I'd heard enough stories from other people who had run away from God that I knew that wasn't a good idea. But I took my scientific mindset, which I think is an asset, and turned it into an arrogant skepticism. I would sit in the back of chapel in college and stubbornly refuse to lift my hands or get excited during times of worship, because by golly, nobody was going to manipulate me into an emotional response. It really bothered me to watch everyone else get excited in chapel, because if they were feeling something that I was missing, then there was something wrong with me. And if they were just manufacturing an emotional response as I accused them of doing, then that just reinforced my skepticism.

Because I didn't seem to fit the expected mold of a ministry student, the message I received was that I was somehow broken, and I couldn't work for God until He fixed me. I even had people ask

me how I could be called to be a pastor when I was such an introvert. So I was angry at God during those years, but I knew I couldn't run away from the call or else, so I thought, God would *really* make me miserable. I thought He was that sort of God. And I nearly walked away from Him.

In the gospel passage we read for today, we see many people walking away from Jesus. A surprising number, really. He has just said some very provocative things, so I was right in my assessment that God is not a pushover and He's not tame. But what has always surprised me most is that Jesus doesn't go after them, which throws most of our church growth models right out the window. What counts for Him is commitment, not numbers. He's not forcing anyone to follow Him, and He respects their choices. That's where my understanding of God was in error: I knew all about the Bible and the church and the doctrines of God, but I hadn't yet really come to grips with the character of God. I didn't really see Him yet for who He really was.

That's the problem at the root of this desertion taking place in John 6. We're picking up right after what we read last Sunday, right around this great miraculous sign Jesus performs of feeding five thousand men and their families using five loaves of bread and two fish. In John's gospel this gives rise to a theological debate, because people immediately (and rightly) make the connection between what Jesus did and the stories from their nation's history when God fed them in the wilderness using bread from heaven. So they begin to question Jesus about the meaning of this act and, frankly, whether they can count on more bread like that. But as we heard last Sunday, Jesus calls them to something greater, to bread that doesn't spoil but is eternal. He calls them to Himself, because He is the true bread from heaven.

But then He keeps pushing the issue. He takes that metaphor way too far for most people's comfort. He tells them that "unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you." "My flesh is real food and my blood is real drink," He tells them, and "whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in them." Even if we just say that He's using a metaphor here, we might want Jesus to tone it down a bit. Cannibalism is a taboo in most cultures around the world, and it was especially taboo for the Jews with their food laws. "This is a hard teaching," responds the crowd of disciples; "who can accept it?" And many of those who had been following Jesus up to this point now turn their backs on Him.

We could tell any number of similar stories from the Bible, or from church history, or maybe even from the histories of people right here in this room. I think of King Saul, who failed when it came to the challenge of simple obedience to the commands of God. I think of King David, who failed when it came to the challenge of power and lust. I think of many of the kings who followed them, who regularly failed to follow God when they were faced with the challenge of rejecting the politically expedient false gods of other nations. I think of the Twelve disciples of Jesus, who, even though they remain committed to Him in this passage, later on end up failing to follow Him all the way to the cross. I think of countless people in our world today who choose not to follow God because they do not see how a good God could have an answer to something as horrible as the Holocaust. Or people like I was during that crisis of faith, in which my understanding of God and my experience of God didn't line up.

So for the people who come through the crisis and decide to continue following God, what is it that keeps us on the path? What makes the difference between a journey abandoned and a journey

maintained? There are countless different stories, so surely there are countless reasons for why people make the choices they make. But our Scripture readings for today point us toward two things that probably factor into a lot of peoples' choices. The first is quite simply being prepared. You survive a current crisis by drawing on your experiences from the past. For those people who had not yet followed Jesus closely enough, who had not yet fully committed to Him, who had not yet started catching a glimpse of the kingdom He was proclaiming, this message of eating His flesh and drinking His blood flew in the face of all their past experiences and expectations. But for the Twelve, those who had been closest to Jesus, those who had invested more time and had been invested in by Jesus in return, they had more to draw from.

This is illustrated well in our reading from Ephesians 6, the famous Armor of God passage. It's a wonderfully poetic passage; you can just picture some impressive, Roman-style armor as you read through it. We could go through and diagram out each of the virtues listed, and maybe imagine inscribing each one on the appropriate piece of armor. But the point of all of it is to stand firm. Again and again throughout the passage, we see that word *stand* repeated. Trials will come. The devil has his schemes. We are opposed by worldly authorities and powers. We live in territory occupied by enemy forces, so we cannot expect our journey to be a walk in the park all the time. So what makes the difference between standing and falling is being armored up, being prepared, getting ready ahead of time and being practiced with the tools God gives us.

But that's not enough. You can study and prepare and practice every spiritual discipline in the book, and you can learn everything there is to learn about the Bible and church history and theology, but that's not really enough to keep you following Jesus through the crises of life. That wasn't what kept me following Him, at least not all the way. It definitely helped. I knew in my head what the truth was and what I was supposed to be looking for, and so when I was tempted to wander, there were many times when the things I'd studied and learned kept me from straying. But as much as I love learning and thinking and arguing and proving my faith, what keeps us on the path for the long haul is the ongoing experience of the presence and power of the living God.

Jesus watches many of His disciples desert Him after He describes to them the depth of commitment He's looking for, and He turns to the Twelve, His closest disciples, and asks them whether they're planning on leaving, too. Peter speaks up and says, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God." They were able to set aside the difficulties they might be having with what Jesus was teaching because they had come to realize who Jesus really was. They came through the challenge because they knew they were in the presence of God.

In my life, and in many other people's lives, what kept me walking with God was coming to know the character of God through personal encounters with Him, not just by reading or hearing about Him. What kept me was watching as God opened doors and provided for me in unexpected ways, as He showed me how He could be faithful to me in the call He had placed on me. My crisis of faith came when I wasn't sure I trusted the character of God, when I suspected He wasn't truly good and faithful and loving, when I insisted I knew better than He did. That's true of many people. But when you instead come to recognize that Jesus is the Holy One of God, that His promises are sure, that He is truly loving and not vindictive or spiteful or capricious or angry, then the crises we face are put in a new perspective.

Many of us go through crises of doubt. Sometimes I think it's almost an expected part of growing toward maturity in your faith. But what will keep you through that time is preparing yourself by being faithful toward God, and what will keep you forever is knowing the presence and the character and the power and the goodness of the living God.



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