

The past three weeks, we have heard from Jesus in this one discourse, in His bread of life sermon. He has made some pretty remarkable statements and made eternal promises. This week, as we conclude this section of John, we hear more miraculous words from Jesus, and we get to see how people are reacting to everything He has offered.

You might think that they would be pretty excited—the guy who just did a work of God and fed them out of barely any resources has begun promising us life everlasting. But their response is much less jubilant. They grumble, they're hesitant. They say that this is a hard saying.

But what is a hard saying? “You guys,” I’d ask them, “which part is it that you’re finding difficult?” I think that they likely had a hard time hearing, let alone believing, in pretty much everything Jesus said. Some bible interpreters throughout history have put forth that they didn’t like the idea of cannibalism—how on earth could Jesus, the guy living and standing right in front of them, give His flesh, and why on earth would they want to eat some of His body, anyways? This likely disturbed the crowds, just as it has thrown people off throughout history

Others think that they were put off by Christ’s claims of heavenly origins. They certainly voice these concerns, reminding Christ that they knew His parents so He can’t fool them. But apart from this being ludicrous in their eyes, it is also more than a little blasphemous. Jesus doesn’t just claim to be from heaven but claims a special relationship with God—yet the idea that God would come down here and be among sinful people sends chills up their spines. The divine is separate from the human, and until the human becomes sinless, there’s no way for the two to come into contact—let alone be found in one being.

This complaint continues as they disbelieve the extent of Christ’s promises. How could He offer eternal life? And how could he offer it through something so earthy, so not-divine, as His own flesh and blood? Drinking the blood of animals was sinful, and partaking in cannibalism was unheard of, and then to offer heavenly promises by such a repulsive method was not something they could comprehend.

And all of these promises were to be given to those who eat and drink of His flesh, His blood?

Who simply receive it? The flesh and blood, as given by Christ, would alone give life, and life eternal, without any other input from the receiver. That goes against everything that the Jews and in fact all of humanity has ever believed.

Essentially everything contained in Jesus' concluding statement "Whoever feeds on this bread will live forever" stops them in their tracks and causes many of them to doubt and disbelieve and say "this is a hard saying. Who can listen to it?"

Their doubt doesn't come by being overwhelmed by demands placed upon them—their bodies aren't afraid of being worked too hard nor are their brains nervous from needing to think too much. What Jesus said simply goes against what they thought they knew, what they wanted to believe. It was offensive to them, and listening to it, believing in it, was terribly hard.

It was hard for the disciples then, and in today's culture this remains hard to receive.

Two weeks ago, we talked about Jesus offering satisfaction in the beginning of His sermon, but the world does not want satisfaction like Jesus offers—they don't want a heavenly satisfaction that we must trust in and wait for, but instead they want an earthly satisfaction here and now, something they can touch and feel and enjoy now. SO heavenly satisfaction is a hard saying for the world.

And last week we talked about the assurance of the resurrection, and in today's world, both aspects of that are ridiculous thoughts—an afterlife? That we can be sure of? That we can be sure that we are going to? People don't believe in God let alone an afterlife that we might exist in—in a world where everyone has their own truth, people can believe whatever they want and at the same time be sure of nothing because millions of other options could be correct. So the assurance of the resurrection is a hard saying for today's culture.

And just as it always has been, people today dislike Jesus' talk about receiving all of these benefits by grace—in our world, there is always a string attached. You've got to pay for something, you

have to work for it, you need to give before you can get. The idea of grace is foreign to the world. It is a hard saying to receive.

Now it is so easy to point at the world, at the culture today, and tear down its godlessness. They refuse to believe what the church points out, and yet this lesson, these words of Christ, as recorded and told by John, must make us stop and walk from the window looking out at the world to a mirror looking back at ourselves.

This is not a hard saying for the crowd—yes, they were disgruntled at some of what Jesus said. And the Jews, too, discussed among themselves what Jesus meant by what He said. But it was the disciples who found His words hard to hear. They were the ones who took offense at the idea that eating this bread from heaven would give them eternal life.

It is the disciples who heard Christ's sermon and decided that they had had enough and were going to walk away—and even among the 12 who stayed passed the exit of disciples, even among the core group, Jesus knew that there was one who was going to betray Him.

The fact is, you can walk with Jesus your whole life and still be weak. It doesn't matter how much of the bible you know, it doesn't matter how deeply you understand grace, it doesn't matter how many life-trials you have gone through and been carried through by Christ, you will remain weak in the faith, always susceptible to falling into temptation, always a target of Satan as He tries to steal you away from your Lord.

There isn't a single one of us in here who can withstand the sin in ourselves and in our world, so we should not be shocked that it is both difficult to get people to come in here and believe and in fact even to keep them here. But Christ is not losing, the Church is not failing, when members walk out the door. The Gospel is not proven to be fruitless and futile when people decide that faith isn't quite the thing for them. In fact, Christ still yearns for those who grumble and waffle back and forth and even for

those who decide this is crazy and deny their Lord. And it is good that He cares for them, because it will be by His power that they end back in faith as well, and us too.

We would be crazy to think that we would not stray so far from the truth that we have come to know and love. It is Peter, after all, who makes the beautiful confession to His Lord at the end of our text. Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. And yet around the fire pit, Peter denies His Lord, from whom He received the hope of Eternal life. He denies the bread of Heaven which He had already feasted on in faith. If someone as assured as Peter can fall away, then we best not think that we are immune.

It was only by the grace of God that the 12 stayed when that initial group fled. I'm not sure what kind of spirits they were in as they gathered around Jesus, when He asked them whether or not they'd like to join their fellow disciples. Peter, representing the others, voices the hope they have, but who knows what kind of conviction He had. In some ways, the confession can almost sound defeated—"Jesus, we're not really sure we get what you're saying, and it definitely sounds strange to us, but who else could we turn to? No one else has offered us anything near as good as you have set before us."

And we too, can waffle. Yes, Some days we are confident, just like we sing it in the service. The musicians can really pull it out of you as you sing the Alleluia's: "Alleluia! Lord to whom shall we go? You! You have the Words of Eternal life!" Some days you know without a doubt that faith in Christ is exactly what you want and precisely what you need.

Other days, it feels like there should be a question mark at the end of it—Alleluia, Lord to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, right? This sounds right, this all sounds familiar, and yet it's not really doing it for me. I can't quite understand it today—Christ, you can't really be who you say you are; you can't really give me what you promise to give me; it can't be that easy. Something feels off—something has to be wrong. But I'm saying it because at this point it's all I know.

August 19 Proper 15

John 6:59-69

Pastor Scott Brayall

This is what we know, even if we only half heartedly believe it some days, because the Father, out of His grace, drew us to Himself. The Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, spoke to us His words of Spirit and Life, the Words of Eternal Life, and by grace we were fed with the Bread of life, the Bread come down from Heaven. It was by grace that we were fed with such a life giving feast so that we have come and stayed until this point on August 19, 2018

And it is by grace that we are constantly fed in order to stay past today as well—each day, we do not flee because we are always being drawn, being kept, being His. In fact...

“Wherever the message is proclaimed that Christ gave his body into death and shed His blood for our sins, and wherever this is taken to hearth, believed, and retained, there Christ’s body is eaten and His blood is drunk. This is the true meaning of eating and drinking. To eat is synonymous here with to believe.” Luther 440. Thus we are drawn to the Father by the feast of the Gospel. And the banquet is set before you every time the Word is proclaimed to you.

It is in this, The soul’s reception of Christ the Word that grace is worked daily in you and me so that we do not flee from this Gospel message that is nonsense to us by nature, too hard for us too receive. As Christ proclaims His Word to you through His ministers, as His body builds you up and encourages you from the mouths of those in the pews around you, you are receiving the Words of Spirit and Life—this message proclaimed to you, which some days feels only like a story to learn and know, truly gives the gifts it talks about as you hear it in faith.

And as you come to the Holy Supper, you feast in a way even more tangible, concrete form. The Word incarnate comes to you in an absolute and specific way, one you can touch, smell, see, hear, and taste. And here the spiritual feast where we receive the blood and flesh of our incarnate Lord given up for the life of the world comes to sustain you in particular. So that you may not deny that Christ was given into death, which He conquered and rose for you, He has given you this gift that you may feast here at the table which He will soon prepare for you.

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It is through these means that you are kept, held close. Not by your own determination, not by your own routines of prayer and devotion and praise. Not by your own personality traits. It is by the working of God that you are kept. So daily, let us all despair of even the best of our own intentions to remain faithful in Christ and turn to Him instead for life and a life of love. And He will not forsake you. Instead, He will surely keep you close and abide in you as He makes a home in Himself for you. And there, in the body of Christ, you will dwell throughout your days here on earth and in life after that.

This, you may be confident of, because even though the promises of Christ are a hard saying—sometimes difficult for us to hear, other days difficult to believe—these are only hard for us. Christ has no problem believing them and reminding us of them—He performed the hardest part, that of dying on the cross, enduring the full wrath of God on behalf of the whole world. He has taken what was so hard that it was in fact impossible for us, and has made it free and easy, and has drawn you and I to believe it in order that we might receive it. So do not fear that it is too much for you, nor that one day it might be too difficult for you to hang on. For He who did the hardest part Has promised to hang onto you and all whom He has drawn to the Father, so the hard part is over—all that is left is to simply come and feast, today and always, on the Bread of life that gives eternal life, come down from Heaven for you.

Amen.