

1 Kings 8:22-30,41-43
Psalm 84
Ephesians 6:10-20
John 6:56-69

Proper 16B
St Barnabas, Bainbridge Island
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To Whom Shall We Go?

This is our last week immersing ourselves in John's mysterious and mystical gospel, our last week to dwell on abiding in Jesus and Jesus abiding in us, our last week of reflecting on the indissoluble connection between bread and the bread of life. For at least one of you, I know this comes as blessed relief! It won't be an easy departure for me. I have loved this.

We've come to the end of this 6th chapter of John's gospel and while our reading this morning began with eating and drinking and abiding, it turned pretty quickly to other things. The crowds that had followed Jesus to Capernaum are beginning to wonder about what they've gotten themselves into. *This teaching is difficult, who can accept it?*¹ is what we hear them say. It's a bad translation really. That word we hear translated as "teaching?" That word is really Logos – the capital W Word. *In the beginning was the Word. And the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*² It's that Word. It isn't just the eating flesh and drinking blood Jesus' followers are struggling with. It's the very fact of him. He is the difficult Word. The life he is calling them to is difficult. And they are beginning to realize it.

There were some who had already left it all behind. Jesus knew there were others in the crowd who were scandalized by his teachings, and still others who would betray him outright. And so he turned to Peter, who often stands in for all the disciples, who often stand in for us, and asks – *What about you? Do you also wish to go away?*³ And while Peter was beginning to understand that this path was not an easy path, he did not wish to go away. *Lord to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.*⁴ And still, the crowd that had once been 5,000 dwindled down to 12.

It would be easy to be disheartened by this, wouldn't it? I mean, what if that had been your church going from 5,000 members down to 12 in a matter of weeks you might choose a different tack, maybe try a praise band or something. Of course this is a very loose interpretation of what is happening, and still the point is not lost on me. People leave the church now, or never come to church to begin with, because if we take Jesus at his Word, the way is not merely countercultural, it's really hard. It's as true today as it was in Jesus' time. People walked away because the way was difficult. And the reason it's difficult is because the way is about loving and following. Not leading. Not getting ahead. Not being the best or the brightest, not about having the newest or the fanciest or the most. The way is about following Jesus, because Jesus is our

¹ John 6:60

² John 1:1

³ John 6:67

⁴ John 6:68

true home and there is simply no other place to go. *Our hearts are restless O God. Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you*⁵. While Peter knew the way was difficult, he also knew that everything he needed, everything he genuinely wanted, could only be found in Jesus, the one who offers bread and the bread of life, the one who holds the words of eternal life, the one in whom we abide, the one who abides in each and every one of us.

The whole thing is really hard to imagine, isn't it? Think of the miracles, think of everything those people had seen and heard Jesus do and say. Yes, the way was hard, but it was actually Jesus in the flesh... how could they possibly walk away from all that? We could ask ourselves the same question each time we walk away from Jesus in the flesh, incarnate as the mentally ill woman on the street, each time we walk away from Jesus in the flesh, incarnate in the family without a home, each time we walk away from Jesus in the flesh, incarnate in the one who has hurt us. I imagine that walking away has a lot to do with surrender and giving up control. I imagine it has to do with not being able to recognize surrender as the only path to real freedom. It's one of the many paradoxes characterize Jesus' life, right in there with the first being last and the last being first. At first glance it doesn't seem to make sense, but it does. It just requires us to dig a little deeper to find the real meaning. Lots of important things are like that.

The path of surrender being the path to freedom is antithetical to the ways of our world. Our society tells us to take control of our lives, to be in charge, to manage and manipulate things to our own greatest advantage because that's how we'll get ahead, be on top, have the most, be the best, whatever all that means. Christianity has its own form of that kind of thinking – it's called the Prosperity Gospel and it says you can tell how good God thinks you are by how much stuff and money you have. If you do what your Prosperity Gospel preacher tells you to do, God will bless you with money and stuff. But it isn't so. Not just because that is not the way the God of love loves, but also because surrender is something we can actually do. Being in control is not. Being in control is always, always an illusion.

"Mr. Jones, I'm calling about the results of your biopsy."

"I'm sorry, I've fallen in love with someone else."

"Ms. Anderson, we're holding your son in jail."

"There's been an accident."

We are not in control. We cannot control the world around us and yet we spend a lot of our lives trying to do just that. It's the reason some people say we prefer religion to God. Religion is full of rules, church is full of rules and we like that because we can make rules and behave by the rules and measure ourselves by the rules. We even think we can control people by the rules. Because when people don't follow the rules, whether those rules are spoken or unspoken, we can punish the rule-breakers whether it's by talking badly about them behind their backs or refusing to talk with them at all. Rules we can control. The Holy Spirit? Not so much. Compassion, tenderness, forgiveness, vulnerability... the way of Jesus is so much harder than the

⁵ St Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*

way of the world. Yet where else would we go? Coming together as a community of faith, a community of people learning together to follow the way of Jesus of Nazareth, a eucharistic community that is broken and blessed and given for the life of the world is not a place I can walk away from. You are not a community I can walk away from. Where else would I go? Where would you? Whether we're taking the first, tiny steps of faith or we're deeply steeped in our Christian faith, our home is in God and we will only ever be satisfied by resting in God. And that, my dears, has nothing to do with control and everything to do with surrender.

Take, bless, break, give. It's what Jesus did with the bread when he fed those 5,000 hungry people, and what he does over and over again in the world and in our lives. It's what we will do at this table when I say the prayers that ask God to imbue the bread and the wine and ourselves with God's holiness, and the real presence of Jesus. Take, bless, break, give. It's what we are to do with our own lives too. To live this way is to live eucharistically, offering the same sort of heartfelt hospitality Jesus offers, loving every outcast and sinner that ever was or will be. To live eucharistically is to be filled to overflowing with the God who loves us with abandon and to give our very lives to the God who abides in us and offers us perfect freedom in our surrendering.

When we gather around the Eucharistic table this morning, we will come to surrender and to remember – not the thinking about something a long time ago kind of remembering, but remembering as the opposite of dismembering. The gift of Jesus truly present in the bread and wine is the gift of re-remembering, re-joining ourselves to Christ and to one another.

Remember me in the breaking of the bread, Jesus said. Remember our new covenant each time you sip the wine. This is not the kind of remembering that takes the place of forgetfulness. This remembering is reconnecting. This remembering re-members us to Jesus and to each other. This re-remembering undoes the dismembering that happens to us when we separate ourselves from one another, when we try to control and manipulate the world around us, when we deny the goodness of God's grace in our lives or when we betray God's love in our failure to truly love everything God loves. This remembering that Jesus speaks of re-members us to everything and everyone who has ever been, as the communion of saints swirls around us in the Eucharist. This remembering holds hope and healing and the promise of eternal life. Where else could we possibly want to be? Amen