

1 Kings 8:22-30, 41-43
Psalm 34:9-14
Ephesians 5:15-20
John 6:51-58

Proper 15B
St Barnabas, Bainbridge Island
August 25, 2024
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Surrender

In my work, I have the privilege of sitting with people who are suffering. Whether the suffering is grief over the death of someone they dearly love, or having received a frightening diagnosis, whether it comes of a broken heart or a broken relationship, or just a deep sadness that will not abate, accompanying someone in their suffering is humbling, and an honor. Accompanying is different from answering. I don't usually have answers for people. And I don't think that's why they come to sit with me. I think they come because they know I will be present, because they know I will pray and hold faith even when they cannot, because they know I will stay with them no matter what. I have often said "We don't know where this journey will take us, but wherever it does, we'll go there together."

So many of these recent conversations have included the reality that sometimes we just can't come up with "the answer," the "the solution," or "reconciliation and resolution," at least not with our good, God-given minds. Sometimes there just aren't answers. Sometimes we're looking for resolution where resolution seemingly can't be found. We can't get there by thinking or list-making or problem solving. I think that's why Jesus said, "It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless." I don't think he meant there was dualism between flesh and spirit. I think he was saying that we can't necessarily get to where we need to be on our own or with our minds. We can only get to the place of deep peace by believing and surrendering, which is the work of the Spirit. Sometimes I think we imagine that real faith is rock solid and absolutely certain, and I suppose there are times when some of us feel that way. But for most of us, faith isn't rock solid and certain, particularly in the midst of suffering. But the simple act of surrender – "God, I can't do this, please hold this for me or at least with me," opens us up to the possibility of finding the peace we seek.

Surrender is a huge component of faith. Not knowing is a huge component of faith. Questions are a huge component of faith. As it turns out, faith is a mystery. That's what I've been thinking about as we come to the last of five weeks exploring Jesus' bread of life discourse. I've been thinking about how the mystery of faith is both universal and personal. It's what the disciples who stayed as well as the disciples who turned and walked away were experiencing. They were a collective - so many more than just the twelve had been following Jesus for some time. Both collectively and individually, they found his teachings to be increasingly difficult to understand or take in, found them to be asking more of them than they thought they had to give. I imagine if we listen closely to Jesus his words probably ring true for us too. Jesus often asks more of me than I think I have to give and every time that happens, I have to choose a response. It can be exhausting, and I can only imagine how hard it would be to be in his physical presence, to stay in

his presence, to continue to “follow” if I thought I couldn’t follow because I knew I could never do all he was asking.

And so today, when Jesus says, “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me and I in them,” when he says “Whoever eats me will live,” it’s simply too much. Can you imagine it? Jesus, the master, the teacher, the one right in front of you telling you to eat his flesh and drink his blood? Of course it was too hard. And so many gave up and left.

It’s important to remember that even though people who followed Jesus throughout his earthly ministry came to understand him over time, they had expected a savior who would be a mighty king, a savior who would save them from occupying Rome, a savior who would save them above all others. Just a few weeks ago, Jesus narrowly escaped the crowds who were trying to take him and make him an earthly king. Only five days before his crucifixion, the crowds were waving their palms, crying “*Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord— the King of Israel!*” *John 12:13* But that wasn’t the sort of king Jesus came to be. His kingdom was built on love, on trust, on justice and mercy and intimacy. Some of the disciples were happy about that. Some of them were confused and disappointed. Some of them stayed, and some of them walked away. That’s the choice we’re given. We can leave, and sometimes we do. When the teachings are too difficult, when life is too difficult, sometimes we just walk away, no matter how close we’ve been to Jesus.

I’d like to think the disciples who walked away that day, came back. It’s happened for us. I know I’ve walked away, and I know many of you have too. God gives us the freedom to do that and gives us the freedom to return. It’s important not to judge any of it. Following or not following Jesus is between you and your God, not between you and anybody else. That holds true for everyone. We are all responsible for our own relationships with God, each one of us with the choice of how we respond. Other people’s choices, just like our choices, are God’s business, not ours.

Our business, those of us who choose to follow, is to pay attention, follow closely, and learn from Jesus how to love ourselves and all the world back to wholeness. This Jesus we follow is hard to make sense of sometimes – *If you want to save your life you must lose it... Matthew 16:25, If you want to be first, you have to be last...Mark 9:35*. The upside-down kingdom of heaven doesn’t make logical sense, and still, it is the deepest truth there is. We can’t think our way into it, we just have to choose it. We can choose to believe that justice and mercy and compassion and kindness and truth and beauty and love will win ... or we can believe that the terrible things that go on out there will win. We can take our part in bringing God’s kingdom to bear... or we can walk away. We can become part of an imperfect community just like this one, a community that holds Jesus Christ, the bread of life, the living water, the way, the gate, the truth, the life as our God, or we can go it alone. We can participate in eternal life ... not so much the life that goes on forever, but a life in God, deep and rich and meaningful ... or not. We get to choose. When Jesus asked the disciples who stayed, “Do you also wish to go away?” Simon Peter responded with the question I always ask when I’m in that dark night of the soul, when I don’t know where

to go or what to do, when I can't think my way to a solution or even think where to begin. Lord, to whom shall I go? You have the words of eternal life.

Our spiritual journeys are not linear. They go up and down and around and around and around. Sometimes God feels so close we could weep, and sometimes God feels so far away... we could weep. I know very few people who have not questioned their belief, who haven't thought at one time or another that their faith was in vain. Maybe it was in the hospital in the wee hours of the morning as you prayed for a gravely ill child or grandchild. Maybe it was in the doctor's office when you learned your spouse had advanced cancer, when you'd thought it was only a backache. Maybe it was hearing the words "I'm leaving" when you knew there were issues but didn't think things were so bad. Maybe it was finding out you had hurt someone terribly when you never meant to, but you just weren't paying enough attention. Maybe it was an emptiness that seemed endless and unquenchable. Those are the times when, if we make the quiet space to listen, we'll hear Jesus calling us back to himself. And one of the beautiful and tender ways he does that is by giving us himself, the bread of life, in the sacramental bread and wine, those outward and visible signs of God's grace. In the sacrament of holy communion, Jesus is truly present, calling us back to him week after crazy week, calling us to take him in, to feed on him, to be filled by him. In the ordinary things of this world, a bit of bread and a sip of wine, Jesus becomes present to us and in us once again, filling us with himself, uniting us to himself, and joining us with one another.

One last thing before we leave this sojourn into bread and the bread of life. It can be tempting to say that in all this talk about eating flesh and drinking blood, Jesus is just speaking symbolically or metaphorically. It's more comfortable than trying to make sense of something that frankly sounds horrifying. But Jesus is so insistent, and his language is so graphic that it really doesn't let us go all spiritual and metaphorical, and for that I am glad. We're not meant to let loose of the flesh and blood reality of Jesus or ourselves or every other flesh and blood beloved child of God. No bodies without spirit. No spirits without bodies.

Flesh and spirit. Bread and body. Wine and blood, they're all inseparable. We simply cannot separate the mystery of God from our own flesh and blood, from the flesh and blood of the ones we love or even the ones we find hard to love. God's Holy Spirit abides in everything in the whole wide world, in the sand, the wind, the rocks, the sea, in the bread, in the wine, in you and in me. We're all alive with God's Holy Spirit, coming to this table to be fed and to be filled once again.

If we've learned nothing else from these five weeks of listening to Jesus go on about bread and the bread of life, I hope we have learned that Jesus makes us community by gathering us into himself and giving us himself, and the reason he does that is so we can give ourselves to the world. When we come to the table today, where everything is gift and everything is shared, we become the Body that holds all of the love and beauty and brokenness of the world, the Body that offers hope and healing and radical love. So come. Take Jesus in and let yourself surrender to the one who loves you, the one who will never abandon you, the one who wants to fill you to overflowing so that you can pour yourself out for the life of the world. Amen