

“Great Expectations”

John 6:56-69

Preached by Dr. Robert F. Browning, Pastor

First Baptist Church

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Something was wrong, terribly wrong, and the disciples knew it. The crowds coming to see and hear Jesus, which had numbered in the thousands, were getting smaller. There was no more talk about making him a king and pledging allegiance to him. One by one, the people supporting Jesus were walking away confused and disappointed.

You can imagine how this made the disciples feel. They left their families, homes and jobs to follow him. They placed all their confidence and trust in Jesus, and the last thing they wanted to do was go back home with their heads hanging low to face a bunch of “I told you so” skeptics.

What was so unusual is that it was not what Jesus’ enemies were saying about him that caused his followers to turn away; it was what he was saying. To be his disciple, Jesus told people they would have to live like he lived, adopting his values and treating people, even their enemies, the way he did.

In other words, they would have to value people over things, generosity over greed, peace over war, transparency over secrecy, humility over arrogance, honesty over deceit, integrity over popularity, humility over arrogance, forgiveness over retaliation, serving over being served, sacrifice over selfishness, the power of love over the love of power and building bridges of goodwill and understanding over erecting walls of suspicion and hate. Apparently, this was not what many of his followers had in mind when they responded to his call to follow him.

“When many of his disciples heard this, they said, ‘This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?’” The narrator tells us that many of those following Jesus turned back and no longer accompanied him on his journeys. This prompted Jesus to turn to the twelve original disciples and ask, “Do you also wish to go away?”

Simon Peter spoke up, as he did at Caesarea Philippi, and said, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.”

What are you thinking about walking away from this week? Who are you thinking about leaving? How long have you contemplated this? Why do you think this would be a good thing to do? What kind of impact will it have upon those around you? Have you talked to anyone about it? Have you prayed about it?

These questions emerged from our text as I pondered it last week. There are times when all of us can identify with the people following Jesus during his public ministry. We, too, come to a crossroads and must decide if we are going to honor a commitment or walk away from it. For those who take this kind of decision seriously, it can be agonizing.

Is this where you are this morning? Is there a tug-of-war going on inside of you? Are you trying to decide what to do about your marriage, a friendship or your relationship to a family member? Are you thinking about quitting a job or dropping out of school? Are you struggling with your faith and unsure about whether you want to continue to be one of Jesus' disciples?

How do you make an important decision like this? Obviously, it depends upon the circumstances. There are times when the best thing to do is terminate a relationship and head in a new direction, while at other times, it is in everyone's best interest to remain and work out the problems.

I do not hesitate to advise people to walk away from anything which is wrong and harmful, from abusive and controlling people and from those who are leading them where they do not need to go.

To be honest with you, many people living under these circumstances know what they need to do, but they also know how stressful it is. They often come to me looking for permission, confirmation and courage.

On the other hand, it is not always clear as to what should be done, and it gets a little dicey trying to decipher between what a person wants to do, and what an individual needs to do.

I think this text speaks to this dilemma. I believe it gives us some things to consider before we make a decision to walk away from a relationship or a commitment. What are they?

Don't walk away from something just because it is tough. It appears this was why many turned back and no longer traveled with Jesus. The demands of discipleship were too hard.

They were looking for someone who would make life and faith easy, a leader who would bring order to their lives and remove uncertainty. When Jesus did not do this, they turned away, hoping the next holy man who came along would fulfill their fantasies.

All this talk about loving enemies, caring for the least, sharing resources, making sacrifices for the greater good, being kind to strangers, befriending people who were different, pursuing justice and peace, and forgiving instead of seeking revenge disappointed and frustrated them. They wanted to hear the Prosperity Gospel, which would make all their dreams come true.

Sounds familiar, doesn't it? Many are still looking for a faith grounded in comfort and conformity, not sacrifice and servanthood.

"From this time, many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him."

I don't know what you are thinking about quitting today, but I hope you are not thinking about doing this because it is too hard. Mediocrity never leads to happiness. When you have done less than your best and not achieved your potential, you will be very unhappy, if not miserable.

Sadly, I talk to many people who say, "I wish I had..." I grieve when I see the look in their eyes, which reveals the disappointment in their heart.

Don't walk away from someone who wants the best for you and believes in you. That day in Capernaum, people walked away from a man who wanted the best for them. He loved them unconditionally and was willing to give everything he had to help them achieve their potential.

Yes, he had great expectations for them, but this was because he had so much confidence in them. By God's grace, he knew they could live up to these lofty dreams and radical demands. He knew they could change the world for the better, just as he was.

They turned back, however, and no longer followed him.

Think twice before you walk away from someone who loves you and believes in you. These people are hard to find, but they are absolutely essential for you to be and do your best.

Simon Peter recognized this, didn't he? "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know you are the Holy One of God."

Don't walk away from the people God sends into your life to make you a better person. Be grateful for them and listen to them with an open mind and heart.

Don't walk away from people who need your help. As much as these followers needed Jesus, he needed them. He did not go to the temple in Jerusalem to choose his disciples from among the religious elitists. He went to the humble villages around the Sea of Galilee and chose common folk. He wanted this to be a grassroots movement, comprised of everyday people who lived in the real world.

They turned away from him and his dream, though.

Important decisions are not always about you. As a matter of fact, I'm not sure they ever are. Every decision you make impacts many other lives, more than you probably know.

Who needs you to roll up your sleeves to help solve a problem instead of dumping it in someone else's lap?

Who needs you to rise to the challenge and lead in a way that is best for everyone?

Who needs you to hang in there when the going gets tough instead of abandoning them?

Who needs you to believe in yourself as much as they believe in you?

Who needs you to be a vital part of a team, offering your expertise and encouragement?

Who needs the gifts, skills and abilities you have to offer at home, work, school and church?

Think a long time before you walk away from people who need your help and in whose lives you could make a difference. The thought of them will interrupt your concentration and distract you every day.

“From this time, many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him.”

What are you thinking about walking away from today? Who are you thinking about leaving? Let me strongly encourage you to pray about this decision and talk to others before you do this.

Do you need to reconsider a decision you have already made? Now that you have had time to think about it, you realize you may not have made the wisest decision. Ask God to help you make it right.

By God’s grace, perhaps some of the people in the crowd that day returned to Jesus. I hope so. By God’s grace, you can, too.

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