

“Crisis of Faith”

John 6:56-69

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This morning our attention is drawn to one of the most candid conversations Jesus had with his disciples. The future of his public ministry hung in the balance with a decision his disciples had to make. The stakes were high and so was the tension. Listen as I set the scene for you.

The sixth chapter of John is the longest in the fourth gospel. While this chapter describes two miracles Jesus performed, the feeding of thousands on the shore of the Sea of Galilee and the calming of the sea when a storm threatened the disciples who were crossing the lake during the night, the bulk of the chapter focuses upon Jesus teaching in and around Capernaum.

What Jesus said that day met with much resistance as the religious leaders, who were upset with Jesus, peppered him with questions. They disagreed with how he identified himself, characterized his relationship with God, interpreted ancient Hebrew writings and defined his mission and purpose.

On more than one occasion, John tells his readers the religious authorities began grumbling and arguing among themselves, and they were not the only ones. His own disciples started bickering.

At some point during the day, many disciples that followed Jesus along his travels turned and walked away from him. No longer did they want to be associated with Jesus or help him with his public ministry.

Upon seeing them walk away, Jesus turned to the original twelve disciples and asked if they, too, wanted to leave. He did not want them to stay if they had lost confidence in him.

The air had to be filled with anxiety and tension before Peter voiced the sentiment of the group, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God." (John 6:68-69)

The gospel tells us Jesus carefully chose the places he went after this incident. He knew his life was in danger and his adversaries had begun plotting his arrest to silence his voice.

Why did many of Jesus' disciples turn away from him that day in the synagogue in Capernaum? Perhaps they were tired of hearing religious people argue.

These early disciples were struggling to survive in a dangerous and scary world that had no safety nets. The last thing they needed to hear that day in the synagogue was an argument about religion, but encouraging words of hope that would help them through another week.

Maybe the disciples who walked away from Jesus were intimidated by the religious leaders who were very upset with him. If they continued to follow Jesus, who was now branded a heretic and trouble maker, they would be targeted for abuse, too.

This was the last thing these people needed. They had enough problems to handle without making life tougher by associating with someone the community leaders did not trust.

There may have been another reason many disciples walked away from Jesus that day in the synagogue. They might have been disappointed in him.

They wanted Jesus to make faith simple and easy, and he refused to accommodate them. Instead, Jesus appeared to do the opposite.

He challenged his disciples to live by a higher standard than the one proposed by the religious leaders who disagreed with him. He taught them to embrace an ethic of love which

valued serving over being served, sacrifice over self-indulgence, truth over deception, justice over injustice, inclusion over exclusion, generosity over greed, humility over arrogance, love over hate, forgiveness over revenge, healing over hurting and peace over war.

Jesus expected all who followed him to become passionate about confronting evil, righting wrong, lifting up the lowly, finding the forgotten, liberating the oppressed, healing the sick, feeding the hungry, comforting the grieving, loving the unlovely, forgiving people who hurt them and giving people another chance after making mistakes.

Jesus made it clear his disciples were to live peaceably with one another by building bridges of goodwill, understanding and reconciliation instead of erecting walls of suspicion and hate.

There was nothing simple or easy about living by this ethic of love. It would require swimming upstream in a self-absorbed culture that enticed people to value the love of power over the power of love and rewarded them when they did.

So, many walked away from Jesus.

I wonder what Jesus was thinking or feeling as he watched them go. Was he tempted to run after them and persuade them to come back? Did he entertain the thought of lowering his expectations and reducing his demands?

Did Jesus hold his breath as he waited for the twelve original disciples to make up their minds about staying with him or going back home? Was he relieved to hear Peter's confession of faith and words of affirmation?

Why was this story so important to those in the Johannine community who put this gospel together? Sixty years after this event, those who compiled this gospel knew many of their friends were struggling with the same decision the disciples faced that day in the synagogue. They used this story to encourage them to remain faithful and not to grow weary in well doing.

How does this story speak to us today? It tells me our confession of faith will always be tested. Daily we must decide to follow Jesus or to chart a new course and live by a different set of values.

The choice is ours, though. Jesus will let us make it without coercion.

Why would we opt to remain faithful to Jesus? Being a faithful follower is not easy in our self-absorbed culture where it seems everyone is focused upon getting what he or she wants by any means available.

Listen carefully to what Jesus told the people that day in the synagogue. “The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit, and they are life.” (John 6:63).

Why should we remain faithful to Jesus? Only when the Spirit and flesh are held together do we find abundant and eternal life. Connecting our flesh to the life-giving, spirit-filled words of Jesus brings the best out in us and leads to the highest quality of life one can live.

Based upon what Jesus taught in the synagogue that day, the flesh alone is limited. With God, however, all things are possible, and it is the Spirit Jesus referred to in this passage that helps each of us to do what we could never do alone.

The Spirit will help us...

...to see more clearly what is important, genuine and permanent;

...to make wise decisions;

...to say no to anything harmful and yes to all things good;

...to embrace dreams and visions of a better world;

...to accept challenges and take risks;

...to arrange values and priorities that align with Jesus’;

...to see our blind spots and confess our sins;

...to change our way of thinking, believing and living after making mistakes;

...to persevere in tough times without giving up hope;

...to adapt to changes and travel down unfamiliar roads;

...to get up and try again after life has beaten us down;

...to ask for forgiveness and forgive those who ask;

...to be honest, trustworthy and dependable;

...to be sensitive to others' needs and compassionate;

...to be unselfish and share generously with those needing our help;

...to work hard and provide for those depending upon us;

...to remain humble when we succeed and resilient when we fail;

...to keep our promises and to honor our commitments;

...to be faithful stewards of God's many blessings;

...to seize opportunities to make life better for all people;

...to expose injustice and offer a more hopeful vision for a better world;

...to build bridges of reconciliation instead of walls of hate;

...to love the unlovely and reach out to the disenfranchised;

...to make our lives count for more than accumulating possessions and pursuing pleasures;

...to remain faithful to Jesus when others walk away.

"The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit, and they are life," Jesus said.

This morning, will you make the decision to follow Jesus by opening your heart and life to him?

If you have done this, will you renew your commitment to be faithful every day in every way?

I encourage you to and pray you will. I assure you that you will not be disappointed.