

The Rev. Rose Anne Lonsway
The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Joshua 24:1–2a, 14–18, Ephesians 6:10–20, John 6:56–69
St. Paul’s Episcopal Church
August 25, 2024

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our God, our strength, and our Redeemer. Amen.

“This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?” In today’s gospel reading, we again, hear Jesus offer himself as flesh and blood for the redemption of the world. Last week’s Gospel reading informed us that the people were offended by these words of Jesus. In fact, some were so offended that “many disciples turned back and no longer went about with him.”

People who had walked away from their lives to be a follower of Jesus, now turned away—offended by Jesus words, offended by Jesus! Jesus uses language that set those he is teaching on their ears. When He talks about consuming his flesh and blood, those he is talking to hear it as an abomination in Jewish law. Leviticus and Deuteronomy clearly forbid drinking the life blood of any animal. But is that what Jesus meant literally?

The answer is yes and no. Flesh and blood, in Hebraic terms, is used to describe “the earthly character of human life—the whole person, described as being synonymous with words such as to welcome, accept, receive, believe into, and is associated with sacrifice” (p. 107 Kysar; p. 134 Malina and Rohrbaugh). Those who understood these words literally could not listen to the words of Jesus, and they walked away from him.

Peter Claver Ajer, a professor of New Testament, in a commentary on this gospel stated:

“[this reading] presents a controversy arising from Jesus’ claim to be the bread of life. Jesus’ teaching did not draw all people to him but alienated many, so they left his company. Jesus, the living bread, claims that whoever eats his flesh and drinks his blood abides in him and he in the person.

It’s important to note that this statement, like many others in the Gospel of John, is symbolic. It’s not about literal consumption but the deep, intimate relationship with Jesus. To receive from Jesus ‘the saving power’ he gives his followers, the believer must ‘feed on him.’

The expression ‘feeding on Jesus’ (his flesh and blood) best captures the intimacy in the relationship. To feed on Jesus is to ‘absorb his teaching, his character, his mind, and ways; [and to] appropriate the virtue in him till his mind becomes our mind and his ways our ways; till we think somewhat as he would do if he were in our place, and can be and do what without him we would not be or do; and this because his power has passed into us and become our power.’ Eating and drinking metaphors best express oneness, intimacy, and the best way to be part of Jesus’ life.

Jesus indicates the profundity of the relationship, comparing it to the relationship between him (Jesus) and God (6:57), which is perfect and permanent. Partaking of Jesus' flesh and blood means establishing and remaining in this relationship, lasting and deepening to all eternity, and enabling the believer to live forever." (*Working Preacher* August 25, 2024, on-line)

The Professor's words make Jesus' words easier to hear, don't they? As the people walked away, Jesus turned to the twelve closest to him and asked if they wished to go away as well. Jesus asked them to choose whom they would serve and decide then and there. It was Peter who spoke for them and asked "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."

The Twelve were able to look past the raw language that Jesus was using to see that Jesus, by giving his life, would save life. Sometimes, however, as did those who walked away from Jesus, we are disturbed by Jesus' teachings and sometimes we are tempted to say, actually do say if we are honest with ourselves, "This teaching is difficult. Who can accept it?"

I would venture to guess that most of us have at one time, or another wondered, "do I really believe this?" It's ok to admit it, because usually, unlike those who left Jesus, it is immediately followed with confirmation that, "Yes, I do believe it," even if it is hard to accept – and we have the sacrament of Holy Communion to fill us with belief, to fill us with Christ and confirm our faith: "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."

It is through faith that we can accept the difficult teachings. Our faith comes from the God who loves and saves us, in spite of ourselves. We can accept the difficult teachings and decide who we will serve by accepting, through faith, that Christ abides wholly in us, and we in him, through our participation in the Eucharist and worship as a community. John's gospel shows us that God is the center of our community of faith, where God, Jesus, the Spirit, and we, as those who did not walk away, transform into one body.

We are invited by God, but it is our choice to be a part of this body, our choice to trust that God is there, always with us; loving us, caring for us. It is our choice to be the hands and feet of Christ to and in the world. We hear the call to make a choice in the reading from the book of Joshua. Joshua, nearing the end of his life on earth, calls the people together, reviews their history with God and calls them to choose.

Joshua's call brings to light some issues that impact us in today's world just as they did the Israelites. We have choices; to worship or not worship, and what we will or will not worship. When God calls us, it is nothing that is forced on us; it is our choice. When Joshua calls the people to choose, he calls them to serve the Lord in sincerity and faithfulness; Joshua declares, "Choose this day who you will serve; As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." Can you hear the echo from Peter when he answers Jesus when Jesus asks if the disciples will walk away as well? "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life." The disciples made a choice.

Today we remember another who made a choice for Jesus and changed lives profoundly; Thomas Gallaudet and with him, Henry Winter Syle, Gallaudet's protégé. Thomas Gallaudet is responsible for the ministry of the Episcopal Church to the deaf community. He is described as "The Apostle to the Deaf." His father, Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet, established the West Hartford School for the deaf. His wife Sophia was a deaf mute. The younger Gallaudet delayed his desire to be a priest to teach in the New York Institute for Deaf-Mutes. That is where he met and married his wife, Elizabeth Budd, also a deaf mute.

He attained his desire to be ordained, becoming a deacon in 1850 and served at St. Stephens Church where he began a Bible class for deaf persons. He became a priest in 1851 and was Assistant Rector at St. Ann's church, where he planned and established a spiritual home for deaf persons, St. Ann's Church for Deaf-Mutes. A building was purchased in 1859, becoming a center for missionary work to the deaf and in 1976 merged with the parish of Calvary- St. George. This was the basis of many mission congregations in many cities. Gallaudet's other contribution to the deaf community was the mentoring and encouraging of Henry Winter Syle, who became the first deaf person to receive Holy Orders in the Episcopal church and in 1888, built All Souls Church for the Deaf in Philadelphia; the first Episcopal Church constructed especially for deaf persons. (*A Great Cloud of Witnesses*, August 27).

These two amazing people have given us the gift of worshiping and being in community with our members who are deaf, and we give thanks for them and to them for enriching us with their presence. And as we give thanks, we can recall the choices made by Joshua, the people of ancient Israel, the disciples, Thomas Gallaudet and Henry Winter Syle, and we can give thanks for the choice to believe and know that once we have chosen, it is then our commitment, our responsibility, to follow Christ in the community of God that makes us people of God, one with others as the body of Christ.

Choose today who you will serve. Through God's leading and the presence of the incarnate Christ, dwelling in us, we can say "We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God' – and "As for me and my house we will serve the Lord!" Amen.