

To Abide or to Abandon

(John 6:56-69)

Sermon delivered by The Rev. Matt Rhodes at Christ Church, Millwood, Virginia
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May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Picture yourself seated among the crowd that has gathered in the synagogue in Capernaum. When you first arrived, you could feel the excitement in the air, the sense of knowing something significant is about to happen.

He is here.

Perhaps you have heard Jesus before, speaking at other places in this fishing village or along the shore of the Sea of Galilee. There are only about 1,500 or so who live here in this community and it is after all not a large region, so he and the 12 who traveled with him would not have been hard to find. Or perhaps this is your first time, the moment when you are finally motivated by all you have heard about this teacher to go and check him out for yourself.

Maybe you are ill, and you are praying for an opportunity to approach Jesus and reach out your hand to him in a desperate plea for healing. Maybe your faith is in tatters, the mosaic of your life coming apart as the beautiful colored tiles that make you who you are fall away one by one, chipped and broken. Perhaps the light of God has not reached the darkened spaces where you find yourself living and you want nothing more than to experience the moment when the shutters are finally opened and that light streams in.

Whatever your motivation, whatever your circumstances, you are here – pressed in tight with friends and neighbors, waiting to hear what Jesus will say. *Just one word from him, you think, will change everything. Just one word from him and all will be well.*

What you hear, however, does not meet your expectations. In fact, his words **shatter** them.

*Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.*¹

The silence in this holy space suddenly becomes uncomfortable, the weight of his words settling on you and those around you. People begin to slowly turn to one another, stunned and confused. **What** did he say?

Did he **really** just say that we will abide in one another if we eat his flesh and drink his blood?

¹ John 6:56 (NRSV).

And then you look back to Jesus and find him looking around from one person to another, fully aware that what he has told all of you is difficult to understand. Yes, there are literalists in the group, those who take what he just said as a direct challenge to the traditional dietary laws prohibiting doing the very thing he seems to have just said. *Leviticus tells us not to drink the blood of any animal, for in their blood is their life. Surely he knows that!*

After a moment, he continues, talking about the flesh not being nearly as important as the spirit. *It is through the gift of spirit that you receive life; this gift transcends this world – you cannot define it as something **of** this world.* And then he pauses again, letting the impact of these words sink in. Again, there is silence; this time, however, the silence gives way to a quiet murmur among those in the synagogue.

Someone on your left is offended by his words and his seeming disregard for the holy laws. A few seated directly behind you are simply confused, not sure **what** Jesus is trying to say. The people gathered begin to look around the room, waiting to see what how their neighbors will respond.

And then it happens.

One stands up, telling Jesus that what he has said is just wrong, and they walk out. Others slowly stand, saying nothing but letting the looks of confusion on their faces tell their story, and they, too leave. A handful of others lining the walls shrug, say something to the effect that this is simply too hard, and slip out into the streets of Capernaum.

*Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him.*²

In an instant, many who gathered with you in the synagogue to hear the words of this rabbi have departed. In an instant, the promise of abiding has given way to the reality of abandonment.

And then Jesus looks at **you**. What will **you** do? *Do you wish to go away?*³

On its face, it seems that accepting the promise of Jesus – the gift that he offers – is a simple act. But it is not, and it is not simply enough to accept this gift. It is not simply enough to have him live in us as we live in him and to be content. Accepting this gift comes with an obligation, one to take the life he gives us and put it to visible work in the world. We must allow the spirit that dwells within us lead us to act, for this community, the nation and the world.

The life that we receive through Jesus is the life that we **must** share with others. To do so is demanding; it takes time and energy; and yes, it can – many, many times – be **hard**. But

² John 6:66 (NRSV).

³ John 6:67 (NRSV).

nowhere in any of the Gospels are we promised that living according to the message, mission and example of Jesus' life would be easy. He certainly never said it would be.

*If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.*⁴

His first followers experienced that for themselves. Those who went to the far corners of the known world after his ascension, who faced oppression, difficulties and even the loss of their lives in spreading his message of love and the coming kingdom knew it well. It was not easy to build up the fledgling Church, but they did it. They built up the Church one community at a time ... one baptism at a time ... one healing at a time ... one act of love at a time.

Those first apostles and countless others who came after, those whose names are both memorialized in our tradition and those whose names have faded from the pages of our history, witnessed it for themselves. They lived it for themselves. But they did not do it by themselves.

Doing the work of God in the world requires losing our lives to him, giving up the space for Jesus to abide in us and guide our actions to change the world. And changing the world starts here.

We change the world by building up this congregation, by welcoming the stranger and inviting the friend. We share this space and participate in prayer and worship. We effect change through our outreach and our ingathering, helping those in the larger community and those who come to ours ... here. We cast aside our differences and embrace those things we hold in common. We give of our time, talent and treasure, sharing abundantly from the abundance we have received. We grow into the work to which each one of us is called, the work of the laity identified in the Book of Common Prayer as the first order of ministry.

The work to which we are each called will be hard; kingdom building is not easy. But it is rewarding, and joyous, and meaningful. If we are to build this church ... this community ... this world, then we cannot forever be like those in the synagogue who turned away.

There will be times where we feel we have no choice but to walk away from what is in front of us. Sometimes the message and invitation of Jesus will be too confusing and too hard, and we will need to slip away to regroup. And do you know something? That is okay – and it is okay because Jesus will still be there. When those who walked out of the synagogue in Capernaum that morning centuries ago, Jesus was still there ... still teaching ... still inviting ... still loving. And for those of us today who may at some point feel so overwhelmed or underprepared for the challenges ahead that we must walk away, Jesus will still be here waiting ... and he will be waiting for us whenever and wherever we are ready.

⁴ Matthew 16:24-25 (NRSV).

On whatever day we answer Jesus, today or next week or next year, and in whatever circumstances we reply, we must be like Peter answering Jesus by saying “Lord, to whom can we go?” And in repeating that question, we are sharing the answer that has already been revealed.

Amen.