

August 27, Proper 16:

Psalm [34:15-22](#);

[Joshua 24:1-2a,14-25](#);

[Ephesians 5:21-33](#);

[John 6:60-69](#)

In this morning's gospel, the disciples say to Jesus "This teaching is difficult, who can accept it" and they are not talking about the lesson we heard from Ephesians about how wives should treat their husbands. No they are referring to what came before this reading. Jesus said- "Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day;"

It is not hard to think of reasons why the disciples would have found this teaching difficult. Only those who eat of Jesus' flesh and blood will have eternal life. Otherwise you will have no life. What did that really mean? How could this man that they knew – a man of a flesh and blood offer them such a gift? Was he really from above? Was he God? Was he offering his actual flesh and blood? How could he promise eternal life?

This is indeed a difficult teaching and some of the disciples who had been following Jesus turned back and no longer went about with him. So Jesus turns to the twelve and asks them – Do you also wish to go away? I like Simon Peter's answer – "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."

Do you also wish to go away? Are there times when for one reason or another you have felt the need to leave the church, the community of Christians? This Christianity thing is not easy and walking around with other disciples can be very trying. A Christian community can be a very difficult to be part of. Many people get fed up with how world driven and not God driven so many Christian communities are. Over the past 2000 years we have organized ourselves into churches and we have split off from each other again and again. Think about how many different Christian churches they are. We argue about who's in and who's out. Some communities claim to be the only true communities of Christ. Christians are often considered crazies. Church politics are some of the worst politics around. I know many people who have been burnt by the church or who have left their community of faith because they just couldn't take it anymore.

Do you also want to go away? I remember going away from church in graduate school.

I had been attending the university chapel and the regular chaplain was away for the summer. One Sunday, I heard a sermon from the supply priest that made me want to walk out. It was one of those hellfire and brimstone sermons that to me sounded judgmental and punishing and it drove me away. I decided I would stop going to church. I didn't know why I was going anyway. The best reason I could think of with was that I was going to please my parents and I didn't think that was a very good reason. I stayed away for a couple of years. The interesting part was that during that time if anyone talked to me about why I was no longer coming to the chapel, I would

begin to cry. There was some longing inside me that wanted – needed something at church that I couldn't put words to it and couldn't make sense of. Eventually, I went back to church realizing that I wasn't going to find the reason why I wanted to go to church, while I was away from church. I began to accept whatever I missed at church was not something that could be defined and that it was only when I was part of a community of other Christians that I could explore and grow into this longing.

Often we do want to go away. We all want a break at times and sometimes it takes a break to help us realize what draws us to church. One parishioner told me about what happens when she decides that she wants to stay home on a Sunday morning. Often she finds that she cannot sleep in and feels unsettled. Something pulls at her and many times she ends up getting dressed and heads on out to church.

I think many of us wouldn't mind sleeping in on Sunday mornings - reading the Sunday morning newspaper or enjoying a nice brunch but we are here. Something draws us here. We are like Peter – Lord where else could we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.”

So we are here listening to the Word of God – the words that the disciples find so difficult. This teaching is still difficult for us today. Last week Randolph, in his sermon, asked us how we would feel if Jesus said these words to us. “Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.” He asked for a response from the congregation and people said they felt manipulated, uncomfortable, confused, elitist angry and frustrated. As I heard the different responses from around the room I realized I was not alone in my struggle with these words. I realized that being within the community of the church helps me grapple with this difficult teaching and get some glimpses into Jesus' meaning. Jesus did not mean for us to walk this path alone. We need each other in this community. We need to hear each other's interpretations. We are nourished here. In community we walk with others as we explore our yearning for God.

Being in this community may help us with that other teaching we heard as well. You know the one we heard this morning from Ephesians about wives, being subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord which makes so many modern day people crazy. Paul compares the relationship of a wife and husband to that of Christ and his church and if you think about it is the man you gets the harder role. After all they are to be as Christ is to the church and gave himself up for her. That's a big demand. But think about what we learn being a part of the church, the body of Christ. We learn about the relationship between Christ and his church because we are experiencing it. And while certain parts of that reading may still make us crazy, being part of this community and experiencing the relationship between Christ and his church, teaches us about what God wants for us in our relationships with our spouse. If we go away and are outside of our community, it gets harder to understand how the relationship between Christ and his Church influences and deepens our relationships with each other.

In community we are raised up and nourished in the life of Christ. In community we find strength for the journey in Christ. Think about how we support each other with prayers, with sharing, listening, and being with each other in the presence of God. It is in each other's faith stories that we see God working in the world. It is in our discussions over the difficult texts that we hear Jesus' word to us. It is in each others faces that we get a glimpse of the new life that Jesus promises us. It is in worshipping together and coming to the table and receiving the body and blood of Jesus that we begin to understand the renewing power of this gift that Jesus has given us.

So some people go away, but others say "Where else can I go" and stay. It is by being with the disciples of Christ- those who are gathered here today and those who we meet on our journey, that we come to know God. We come to realize that the word of Jesus is essential nourishment to our community, in spirit and in life. As we worship together, struggle with our faith and walk this path together, we come closer to Simon Peter's words that we have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.