

The Gospel text this morning continues the theme from the last several weeks, a theme known to Bible scholars as the “Bread of Life” discourse. It’s been an interesting and informative theme, but it has grown somewhat repetitive. This morning I want to focus on a dialogue towards the end of today’s passage.

In today’s passage, we are told that the disciples had difficulty with the Lord’s claim that he was the bread of life, and that to have eternal life it was necessary to eat this bread which was his body. Saint John tells us that the disciples said, “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?” I think that the comment, as reported, just barely scratches the surface of some tension between Jesus and his friends. As we read the passage, we become aware that many who had been attracted by our Lord’s teachings and, no doubt, by his miracles and good works, now turned away from him. John would have us understand that Jesus was rapidly losing his following. John reports part of a dialogue coming out of that tension. Jesus said, to the twelve closest disciples, “Do you guys also want to cut and run?” Peter responded for them all, “Where would we go? You have taught us and we believed. If we leave you, what is left?” That is a loose rephrasing of the text, but I think it is accurate. The disciples chose to follow Jesus. They were committed. They would stick to the bitter end. We have chosen to follow Jesus. We have chosen to be Christians. If we turn from this path in the face of obstacles, then where will we go?

Let me try to unpack what was going on in this dialogue for you. Our understanding of Jesus as the bread of life, and of the Eucharist as eating and drinking the body and blood of Christ, have always been difficult concepts for those outside the Christian faith. The result is a lot of misunderstanding. But, you cannot separate the practice of Christianity from the understanding of Holy Communion as receiving the Body and Blood of Christ, even if it is confusing to those outside the faith. The Eucharist is a matter of faith. If you lack the faith, then the Eucharist has no meaning for you.

The Romans accused Christians, in New Testament times, of practicing cannibalism, because they misunderstood the Eucharist. In the Aramaic language that Jesus spoke, flesh eater and devil were the same word. When Jesus said, if you wanted eternal life you had to eat his body and drink his blood it was a hard saying, indeed, and many were shocked to the core over it. There is no wonder that those only superficially attracted to Jesus left him, because to follow him was not an easy thing. The author of today’s Gospel chose his words well. To eat the flesh of Jesus is a very hard saying.

The question for us is what does this passage say to us today? The Eucharist is not a stumbling block for us; neither are the words of this Gospel passage. We know what our Lord meant when he said this, but that doesn’t mean we are free of our own stumbling blocks. All of us struggle with things or parts of Christian doctrine that trouble us, or cause us to hold back. The question for us is, “What gets between us and Jesus?” What

gets between us and following the Lord, so that we are tempted to turn away? In other words, for us what constitutes a very “hard saying?”

Jesus makes demands. The practice of Christianity is not an easy thing. Jesus said that to follow him one must personally take up the cross. In other words, Christianity requires self-sacrifice. The stress is always on self-sacrifice. And the first thing that we have to sacrifice is any preconceived notion about what Jesus would have us do, or what God our Father wants us to do, so that we can remain open to hearing our Lord speak to us and lead us in his way. As I’ve often said, we can get in trouble in a heartbeat if we claim certainty in our knowledge of what God wants or does not want.

Our greatest stumbling block, as we walk the way of the Cross, is a preconceived notion of where the path must take us. If we would be true to our Savior, then we have to acknowledge that it is at least possible that we do not have all of the answers and that what we thought yesterday might not reflect the mind of God today. In other words, we must be continuously open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, who alone truly knows the way and the truth. To borrow a page from an old evangelical hymnal, we must take to heart the refrain, “Wherever He leads, I’ll go.” To do this, we must follow. But to follow is to listen and learn. To follow is to accept his guidance. To follow is to trust Jesus and to be faithful. Doing so, we simply cannot go wrong. *Amen.*