

The entire sixth chapter of John's Gospel is about the bread which can feed God's people. It starts off with the feeding of 5,000 hungry people (5,000 men, that is) who have come to hear Jesus teach them. The next day, when the crowd tracks him down, Jesus says that they are there not so much for to hear him, but to receive more miraculous bread. The word for this day is that they should believe in Jesus, free lunch or not. The crowds point out that they need some kind of sign from him in order to believe.

What sort of sign are they looking for? Possibly more manna, such as Israel received in the wilderness? Or another one-off feeding of multitudes from someone's lunch? Jesus says that the bread in the wilderness, and the bread the day before, are gifts from God. But the true gift from God, for this day, and for eternity, is Jesus himself. He will give his flesh for them to eat and his blood for them to drink, and they will never be hungry again.

This proclamation creates a fire-storm of criticism. For Jews grounded in Torah this violates a fundamental law which God has given. In Leviticus it says, "You shall not partake of the blood of any flesh, for the life of all flesh is its blood. Anyone who partakes of it shall be cut off." Does Jesus insist that they let go of the scripture on which they have been raised? That is impossible.

Many disciples complain that this teaching is too hard. But the word which is translated 'teaching' is actually the Greek word 'logos'. And throughout John's Gospel, logos refers to Jesus – the word of God. It is as though the crowd says that Jesus is too hard to accept. Many of them leave and walk away.

It is important for us to notice that the ones leaving are not referred to as an anonymous crowd, but as 'disciples'. They are people who have followed Jesus for some time, leaving homes and work to hear the teacher, with hopes for something great from him. But this thing which he tells them now is the last straw.

Jesus asks if his teaching offends them. That word 'offend' is actually much sharper in the Greek, where the word is 'scandalize'. "Are you scandalized by my teaching?" Indeed, they are, and they cannot continue

their journey with him, cannot make any further sacrifices. Is it any wonder that Jesus asks the twelve original disciples whether they, too, wish to bail out now.

When Simon Peter replies, he doesn't really answer 'yes' or 'no'. Rather, his response is, "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 like saying, "I don't really understand what you are telling us about eating your body and drinking your blood, but I have enough trust in you, to believe that I will come to understand it someday."

And there is the heart of the matter. It is a question of believing, just as Jesus had told them. But it's not about believing in a church doctrine. Instead, it means to trust or to rely on someone. That is what the twelve disciples have. They trust Jesus even if they don't always understand him.

For us, this whole thing may seem like not such a big deal. We've had two thousand years of immersion in the sacraments, especially the eucharist. We munch bread and drink wine every week and nobody turns a hair. But without two millenia of experience, how do Peter and the twelve leap to the faith of the true answer?

After all, we know from all four gospels that these men will come to times when they abandon and betray Jesus in their own ways. But the heart of their faith at this moment is contained in Peter's almost plaintive words: "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life."

Those 'words of eternal life' are a kind of summation of what Jesus said in the beginning of today's reading. "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them." The disciples who stayed when so many left become part of the abiding community bound to Jesus and to each other.

This is the real point of our sacraments. They bind us to the God who has first bound Godself to us. We can leave this God behind when we are swept up in the message of our culture that one should achieve one's own life and not rely on any other power. But God knows us well and will not let go of us, even when we let go of God.

We are called to abide in love, which is the heart of faith in Jesus. And while we may trust in our own ability to deal with life, we do tend to run into times and events that are beyond our ability to clean things up:

The front pages of recent newspapers tell us of the devastating earthquake in Haiti that killed over 2,000 people, and left even more exposed to the ferocious elements of the hurricane that swept through.

The airport in Kabul, Afghanistan is flooded with terrified people trying to escape the county.

In the south of our country where we have been helpless to persuade people to be vaccinated, hospitals are filled beyond their capacity with patients, and physicians and nurses are exhausted and angry at their inability to save hundreds of lives.

With all our powers and resources, we can provide only a drop of relief to those who have so much less than we do. For while we do what we can, the church is not a social services agency. But we are something more than that. We are the community of body and blood, abiding in the power of God who can save.

Alyce McKenzie, Professor of Preaching, and Worship at Perkins School of Theology, tells the story of a disrupted worship service. She says, "As we filed toward the front to receive communion, a small child, not quite three years old and judged by his mother to be too young to receive, was seated on her lap in the second row. A question popped into his eager young mind, and being a child, he had the good sense to shout it out. "Mommy, where are all the people going?" "Shhh," she said. But he would not be shushed. "Where are all the people going?" he demanded, even more loudly. She clamped her hand over his mouth, but not before he cried out, "I want to go too!" There is a young man who is really ready to commune, since he reflexively understands the point of sacraments – to go with the people and abide with them before God."

For regardless of any theological education, or sophisticated understanding of eucharist, we are the people who will say with Peter,

“Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.” And so, we come here, praising God and being fed, so that we may never be hungry.