

August 22, 2021
John 6:56-69

Pentecost 13
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“To Whom Shall We Go?”

“Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.”

A few weeks into each semester at my university was a day that students nicknamed “D-Day,” the deadline for dropping a course for which a student had registered. This was a “point of no return” date, because after this day a student was obligated to continue in the assigned course until the end of the semester; dropping a course after “D-Day” meant risking an incomplete or even a failing grade. It was not unusual to see a classroom that was far emptier after this day than before; many students would drop a course because it was not what they were expected, or it did not fit into their weekly schedule. But the most frequent reason for dropping a course on “D-Day” was the discovery that the course expectations were far too difficult, that the professor was demanding more from their students than certain students were willing to give. You could hear cries of “it’s too much” or “I can’t do it” in the hallways on the days leading up to the decision of staying or leaving these challenging courses.

I never dropped a course on “D-Day,” but there were times when I wondered if that might have been a good decision. Certain courses were required for my major, so it wouldn’t have mattered if I found the workload too demanding or not; but there were other elective courses that turned out to be very difficult and time-consuming, and as the semester progressed, I did regret staying in this course. I finished all these courses and received decent grades, but I have wondered over the years if the time and effort I spent in these courses was worth it.

Throughout biblical history, many people answered the call to become God’s followers; but there are times when those who have answered this call appear to have second thoughts, discovered that being obedient to God’s Word was far more challenging than they had anticipated. This appears to be the situation that Joshua addresses in today’s first lesson from the Old Testament book that bears his name. As the successor of Moses, Joshua led the tribes of Israel into the Promised Land; now Joshua *“gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem, and summoned the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel; and they presented themselves before God.”* (Joshua 24:1). The purpose of this gathering was to address the apostasy and idolatry in which the Israelites were engaging in direct violation of the command of the Torah that *“I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt,*

out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me.” (Exodus 20:2-3). The Israelites have assumed naively that they can serve both the LORD God of Israel (YHWH) and other gods at the same time, as was the case in neighbouring nations. Joshua induces them to forswear their allegiance to “foreign gods” and to worship and serve only the LORD: *“Now therefore revere the LORD and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt and serve the LORD.”* (24:14). The LORD’s deliverance of the Israelites calls for a response; the acknowledgement that the God of Israel is at the center of life requires a reordering of everything else. As a loyal adherent to the Law of Moses, Joshua does not make an embrace of faith in God an easy task; it is a faith that calls for a decision. Joshua declares that this day at Shechem is “D-Day” for the Israelites when he challenges them to make a decision: *“Now if you are unwilling to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.”* (24:15). In response, the leaders of the Israelites recall all that the LORD has done for them and pledge their allegiance to the God who *“brought us and our ancestors up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and who did those great signs in our sight”* (24:17); they make the decision that *“we also will serve the LORD, for he is our God.”* (24:18).

- “This community, set in motion that day at Shechem by Joshua, continues wherever this decision for loyalty is undertaken. Israel’s decision for loyalty to Yahweh is in the presence and awareness of alternative loyalties, here vigorously and intentionally rejected.” – Walter Brueggemann.

The decision made by the Israelites at Shechem is one that successive generations of God’s people have been challenged to make, because the temptation of “alternative loyalties” was always present. The lure of other gods was a constant threat to the worship of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; it was necessary for the LORD to send prophets to call the people to turn away from loyalty to foreign gods and to *“return to the LORD your God, who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love”* (Joel 2:13). The prophets called on the people of Israel to reject their allegiance to any other gods, proclaiming the word of the LORD that *“I, I am the LORD, and besides me there is no saviour.”* (Isaiah 43:11).

It should not be surprising, therefore, that many people did not respond positively to the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ or his invitation to discipleship. John identifies Jesus as the very Word of God that *“became flesh and lived among us, and we have*

seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth" John 1:14); yet many people rejected him and the blessings he offers to all people:

- “He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.” – 1:10-13.

Even many who initially accepted Jesus and his invitation to discipleship discovered that the demands of being a follower of our Lord were greater than they had anticipated, finding themselves participating in their own “D-Day,” as we see in today’s Gospel lesson. This is a continuation of Jesus’ teaching in which he identifies himself as the “Bread of Life,” offered far more than the manna the people of Israel ate in the wilderness or the feeding of the multitude that many in this crowd had experienced: *“This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever.”* (6:58). Those who partake in the bread that Jesus offers receive the assurance that *“those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them”* (6:56). The verb “abide” (*meno*) expresses the interrelationship of Jesus and the believer that is the source of the believer’s life, and extension of the interrelationship of God and Jesus (*“I and the Father are one”* – 10:30). The one who partakes of the body and blood of Jesus receives life because that person shares in the life-giving relationship of God and Jesus (*“What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.”* – 1:4). Jesus anticipates his gift of the Lord’s Supper in his followers partake of the Body and Blood of Christ, the assurance of our Lord’s presence in this Holy Supper even as it gives a “foretaste of the feast to come.”

We may not be surprised if John reported that the general population had difficulty in understanding or accepting Jesus’ teaching; but his report of the response of Jesus’ disciples, those who had initially accepted his invitation to discipleship, may catch us off-guard: *“When many of his disciples heard it, they said, ‘This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?’”* (6:60). The similarity between his disciples’ protest and those of the crowd is established by the repetition of the verb “to grumble” (*gongyzo*); *“in the face of Jesus’ most explicit and far-reaching offer of himself and the gift of life to those who believe, even many of his followers turn away.”* (Gail O’Day). Their reaction appears to be similar to my fellow classmates who discovered that the course in which they had enrolled was far more difficult than they had anticipated, and therefore they took advantage of “D-Day” and left.

- “The people in today’s reading who now desert Jesus, that is, are precisely those who had, in fact, believed in Jesus, those who had followed him and had given up much to do so. But now, finally, after all their waiting and watching and wondering and worrying, they have grown tired, and they can no longer see clearly what it was about Jesus that attracted them in the first place, and so they leave.” – David Lose.

Jesus’ awareness of these disciples’ grumbling is another example of his insight into human nature (as when he greets Nathaniel by proclaiming that “*Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!*” – 1:47). Jesus issues a challenge to these disciples’ doubt and resistance, asking if the coming ascension of the Son of Man will increase the offence of Jesus’ teachings or make sense of what offends them now:

- “Does this offend you? Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. But among you there are some who do not believe.” – 6:61-64.

Jesus had responded to Nathaniel’s confession that “*Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!*” by proclaiming that “*very, truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man*” (1:50-51). The ascent of the Son of Man – which includes his death, resurrection, and ascension – will become the proving ground for the disciples’ faith, transcending anything the disciples have yet experienced. These protesting disciples do not understand or rightly perceive the flesh of which Jesus speaks. They only see Jesus’ physical flesh; they do not yet see “the Word [that] became flesh.” A new life born of flesh and spirit is possible to those who believe, but if one limits one’s understanding of life to one’s preconceptions of what is possible in the flesh, one will receive nothing; “*Spirit and flesh must be held together; this is the heart of the Incarnation*” (Gail O’Day). Jesus affirms that his flesh has salvific powers only because it is inseparably bound to the life-giving, Spirit-filled words of Jesus.

The Evangelist reports that “*Jesus knew from the first who were the one who did not believe, and who was the one that would betray him*” (6:64); he also knows that access to God is impossible without God’s initiating act, proclaiming that “*for this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father*” (6:65). As salvation is a free gift of grace that is bestowed upon us by God through Jesus Christ, so also is the faith that allows us to take hold of this blessing a gift that is ours through the Holy Spirit:

- “I believe that by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him, but instead the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, made me holy and kept me in the one true faith, just as he calls, gathers, enlightens, and makes holy the whole Christian church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one common, true faith.” – Martin Luther, *Small Catechism*.

The rejection that Jesus foresaw takes place when “*because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him.*” (6:66). As he watches them walk away, Jesus turns to his remaining followers and asks the Twelve “*do you also wish to go away?*” (6:67). The Twelve must choose whether to accept or reject the offer God has made to them at Jesus, similar to the challenge Joshua presents to the leaders of Israel at Shechem. Simon Peter, given the role of spokesperson for the Twelve, responds that their decision is radically different from their former colleagues who walked away: “*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.*” (6:68-69). Peter’s words acknowledge that these disciples have heard and learned from the bread of life discourse because they know that Jesus has the “words of eternal life” (“*Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me.*” – 6:45). Because the Twelve know that Jesus has the “words of eternal life” because he is the incarnate Word of God, they confess that they “believe” and “know” that he is the “Holy One of God,” a confess that will be repeated throughout the Fourth Gospel:

- “If I am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe them. But if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, so that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father.” – 10:37-38.
- “If you know me, you will know the Father. From now on you do know him and have seen him.” – 14:7.
- “Now we know that you know all things, and do not need to have anyone question you; by this we believe that you have come from God.” – 16:30.

The Twelve proclaim that for them, “D-Day” is the day when they decide to remain loyal followers of the one who is the “Holy One of God,” the “one whom the Father has sanctified” (10:36). They will continue to follow Jesus in the path of discipleship that will lead them to the Cross, to the empty tomb, to their being witnesses to the risen Lord, and to being the one upon whom our Lord breaths the gift of the Holy

Spirit so that *“if you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”* (20:23).

At the heart of our Lutheran understanding of the Christian faith is our belief that salvation is a free gift that God graciously offers to all people in Jesus Christ, that *“we are justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law”* (3:28). But while the gift of forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation are available to us in Jesus Christ, it is our decision whether or not we will accept this gift, whether or not we will answer our Lord’s call to follow him or turn our backs and walk away. We are presented with our “D-Day” on the day of our Baptism, where through water and the Word we are *“reborn children of God and made members of the church which is the body of Christ”* (ELW Holy Baptism). In receiving this gift of salvation and new life in Christ, we also declare our decision to renounce anything that would demand our allegiance or draw us away from God:

- Do you renounce the devil and all the forces that defy God?
- Do you renounce the powers of this world that rebel against God”?
- Do you renounce the ways of sin that draw you from God?

We join with Peter and the twelve faithful disciples in proclaiming that we believe only Jesus Christ has the words of eternal life, that he is our one Lord and Saviour, and that we have decided to follow no one else but him, to walk in his footsteps and to serve in his name. When we have decided to follow Jesus, there is *“no turning back, no turning back.”*

- “We are invited – no, we are called to renounce the forces of this world that work against God’s purposes: the forces of evil, rebellion, and sin. Not only in the sacramental water rites in which babies, children, and adults are brought into the Christian fold, but in any way that compromises God’s Word of grace and love for the world God has fashioned.” – Craig Ross.

I have often wondered what would have happened if I had joined my fellow classmates in taking advantage of the “D-Day” opportunity to drop those difficult courses that I decided to continue through the semester. They proved to be very challenging, and I didn’t always receive the best grades, but they proved to be worthwhile experiences in perseverance and facing difficult situations throughout my life. The decision to follow Jesus, to renounce allegiance to anything that would draw us away from God, to see that only our Lord has “the words of eternal life” is not an easy one and does not promise a carefree life; but it does promise us that the one who

calls us will empower us and abide with us so that we may have confidence that *“the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.”* (Philippians 1:6). For God’s people, every day is “D-Day”; may we continue to follow Peter and those faithful disciples in recognizing Jesus Christ as the Holy One of God and following him so that the light of Christ might shine before others so that they may see Christ’s presence in us and give glory to our Lord who abides with us always with the light that shines in the darkness, the light no darkness can overcome.

Amen.