

John 6:56-69

Do you also wish to go away?

It might be the saddest line in all of scripture. But it has its comforts too.

We like to wring our hands about the declining church, but it even happened in Jesus' day. The crowd following Jesus seemed so big, he fed 5000 men plus the women and children. It seemed so determined, they chased him back and forth and around and around the sea of Galilee. They followed him into the wilderness, they sat in the pastures to listen. Now, back at home in his own synagogue in Capernaum, they are almost gone, only twelve remain of the thousands.

It isn't that Jesus was unwelcoming. Jesus never turned anyone away. Jesus welcomed sinners, and tax collectors, Romans, Greeks, Samaritans. He invited them all in. Jesus welcomed everybody, and still his gathering dwindled almost to nothing.

"Do you also wish to go away?" he asked them.

One really couldn't blame them if they had left. It seems like Jesus was actually trying to get the crowds to leave. In other places through the Gospel and New Testament, Jesus offers his Body to be broken and shared. The Greek word is *soma*. Here he offers his flesh, *sarx*, as bread from heaven. In other places, Jesus and others speak of eating his body, using the usual Greek word *phago*. Here the word Jesus is using for 'eat' is *trogo*, which implies to chew or crunch up or eat noisily. Bible translators are too polite. It may be closer to the meaning to say, "Those who smack their lips while they munch my meat will live for ever." It's no wonder people were leaving.

Here, as we get to the end of this series of teachings, he adds blood to the mixture. "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me and I in them." To abstain from blood, though, is one of the oldest commandments of Torah. From God's first covenant with Noah, even though humans were then first allowed to eat meat, blood was forbidden. From the beginning blood was synonymous with life, and life could only be returned to God. To hear Jesus offering both flesh and blood was beyond the pale. It wasn't that they thought Jesus was espousing cannibalism, they weren't stupid, but he was confusing at best and deeply offensive at worst, and the crowds left.

So what was the difference between these twelve and the other 5000? They were looking for different things.

As Joshua and the Israelites at last entered the promised land, Joshua told them, "Choose this day whom you will serve." Choose the Lord, choose the gods we encountered these 40 years, or choose the gods of the land we are entering, but choose. Joshua was wise to demand that choice. Because if we don't serve a higher cause, we serve only ourselves.

Let's remember why the crowds followed. Some of them wanted more bread. He had fed them, and they wanted more. You can't blame them for that, but feeding not what Jesus came to do. John tells us that others followed because they wanted to use him to kick out the Romans and make Judea great again. You can't blame them for wanting freedom, but that's not what Jesus came to do. Others wanted

signs, they liked being amazed at the miracles and teachings. You can't blame them for wanting to be entertained, but that isn't what Jesus came to do. The scribes wanted scholarly debate, others were curious to see what the fuss was all about, some wanted to be healed, some wanted to be with their friends and part of the crowd.

The crowds followed because they wanted Jesus to serve them. And that's not a terrible thing, Jesus wanted to serve them and welcomed them, but he also wanted them to understand what he was welcoming them to. Jesus with his hard language was telling the crowd, the choice he had to offer.

All he had to offer was himself, his flesh and his blood given in love so that we might have spirit and life. Give up yourself and choose myself.

He didn't offer worldly power, but power to overcome the world in commitment to the kingdom of God. Not healing but wholeness in commitment to unity with the being Christ. Not passing entertainment or wishful pie-in-the-sky hope, but joy and fulfillment in the here and now in the flesh. He didn't come to offer a gift, cheap grace, "Eat this miracle pill and go on your way to live forever." But a choice to serve God instead of ourselves by sharing the life of God's Son.

Everyone is invited to share that life. Feeding and healing and community and freedom were all part of that life, as we serve God, God serves us, but sharing body and blood carries expectations, and comes at an infinite cost.

The world serves itself, its own desires and wishes and causes, and the world comes to Jesus to ask what he can do for them.

Peter and the twelve just wanted Jesus. They just wanted the holy One of God, even though they didn't understand his words of eternal life, they wanted him. They didn't want his gifts or what he could do for them, they wanted him. To whom else could they go?

Since the time of Jesus, the church has grown and waned. Sometimes the church has offered worldly power, or entertainment, or signs and wonders, or the assurance that God is on our side. When the world finds those things here, we're full.

It would be easy to have a full church every Sunday, all we have to do is offer free beer. That's way cheaper than a full-time priest. And it's good to bring the world closer, and to give the world what it needs, but that isn't ultimately why we're here.

When we offer self-giving sacrificial love to a world that isn't ready to choose it, we dwindle. The things we say are hard, and not everybody is ready to accept them.

Worldly influence is useful, engaging instruction builds us up, potlucks are to die for, good music leads our hearts to deeper places. but they aren't what keeps us here. We aren't even here to get into heaven or avoid hell. Those things are all self-serving.

We are still here, with no wish to go away, because we believe, or at least suspect, that Jesus is the holy one of God. and there is nowhere else to go to share his spirit and his life, And nourishment and power, healing and joy, knowledge and wisdom, love and eternity all flow from the one we choose to serve and the flesh and blood we share.