

Hard Words

John 6:51-69

Will it play in Peoria? First mentioned in an 1890 book, the phrase gained popularity in the vaudeville circuit of the early 20th century, and was even used by one of President Nixon's aides to describe a policy that was unpopular on the east coast, but would work well in the Midwest. Because of that, Peoria was used as a test market. Comedians, musicians, advertising agencies and pollsters would start in Peoria, using it as a way to figure out what people thought or how they would react. The LWML even used the phrase when their national convention was held in Peoria a few years ago. Finding out what would play in Peoria wasn't about challenging the status quo or trying to get people to change their minds. It wasn't about hard words. It was about convincing others, figuring out what they already thought or already wanted. If it played in Peoria, it would be popular and well received anywhere.

Jesus didn't seem to be concerned with how popular or well-received his words would be. He was only concerned with speaking the truth. He was only concerned with the message he had to share, and the mission he was on from his Father in heaven. Jesus didn't care if it played in Peoria or Palestine. He only cared about the truth. And he would use hard words, difficult teachings and sayings, if that's what was needed.

Jesus used hard words throughout his ministry. We think of the Sermon on the Mount as being full of nice, happy, positive clichés, but it includes phrases like "Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." When a rich young man came to Jesus asking what he must do to inherit eternal life, Jesus told him to give away all that he had. When a disciple asks Jesus how many times he should forgive his brother, Jesus

tells him, not seven times, but seventy times seven times. He told his disciples to take up their crosses and follow him. They couldn't follow him and expect a steady stream of riches to come their way. They couldn't follow him and expect cheers and popularity.

Jesus also told his disciples to love their enemies and to love their neighbors as themselves. Both of those are hard words. Those are difficult words. They're hard to hear, and even harder to do.

But the words Jesus uses here are among the hardest, most difficult, he ever spoke, especially based on the reaction of those who hear them. Instead of drawing crowds to him, almost everyone went away, even some of those who had been following him before. What made these words of Jesus so hard? Was it the fact he was talking about eating his flesh and drinking his blood? Outside of the cannibalism idea condemned by most cultures, just drinking blood of anything would have been deeply offensive for the Jews Jesus was speaking to. Blood was life. Blood represented the life given by God to people and animals. Blood needed to be drained from an animal before it could be cooked and eaten, according to the Jewish dietary laws. Even as the early church later debated how "Jewish" Gentile converts had to be to become Christian, the prohibition on drinking blood remained.

But more than that, Jesus' words were hard because they pointed to his death, and how those who follow him would be joined in his death. Many went away from Jesus, but some remained. In any and all circumstances, the disciples in John's gospel are committed to being with Jesus. "Where else would we go?" asks Peter

"You have the words of eternal life." To be with Jesus, to know Jesus is to be in the best place. It is to be in the presence of eternal life. It is to have life.

The words of Jesus are hard for us, as well. It's hard for us to commit to a Christian view of sexuality when the world is straying in any number of directions away from that. It's hard to commit to a Christian view of the value of all life when the lives of the elderly, the unborn, and the infirm are seen as insignificant. It's hard to commit to self-sacrifice when we're surrounded by messages that tell us to take and buy and get. It's hard to love our enemies when we're surrounded by messages saying we need to defeat or remove those who disagree with us.

G.K. Chesterton wrote, "The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult; and left untried." We still reject Jesus when following him would be difficult. We reject Jesus when it would affect our identity, when it would affect how others see us. We reject God's commands on how to care for the world around us. We reject God's commands and fail to care for God's servants, persecuting them when they say something uncomfortable or unsettling. The hard words of Jesus are a stumbling block for us as they were for the disciples who left Jesus. The words of Jesus offend, defy logic, and are absurd.

The words of Jesus are hard, but bring life. As Peter says, and as we sing in the Gospel response, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life." The words of Jesus are hard, but they are life-giving. They speak law and judgment, but they also speak love and forgiveness. They speak the hard truth of our sin and our inability to save ourselves, but they also speak the words of the one who died on the cross to save us.

The words of Jesus are hard, but they give us something certain and sure to hold onto. In the midst of doubt and despair, there is no greater comfort and hope than the words of Jesus. Even when those words are the source of our unsettled souls, still they remain our only hope. The words tell us of how much God loves us.

Thursday was the pandemic-delayed Field of Dreams game in Dyersville, Iowa, featuring the Chicago White Sox and the New York Yankees. In the movie *Field of Dreams*, the main character Ray Kinsella, played by Kevin Costner, hears a voice. The voice tells him to do crazy things, like building a baseball field in the middle of his cornfields, or go on a road trip to find a reclusive author. Following the words is hard, and almost costs him his farm. Yet the movie ends showing listening to the words brought healing to him, his family, and others.

The words of Jesus are harder than commands from a mysterious voice to build a baseball field in the middle of nowhere. Following them can cost your life. Hearing the hard words of Jesus that point out your sin causes guilt. But the words of Jesus also bring eternal life. And those words are found nowhere else. Where else could we go?

In a mysterious way that I don't quite understand, the Holy Spirit uses God's Word to give us faith in Jesus and all the rest of God's amazing promises. The Bible assures us that God loves us, that Jesus died for our sins and rose again, that there is life after death, and that there is hope for this life through the Lord's will and ways.

Pastor David Beagley
Memorial Lutheran Church and Student Center,
Ames, Iowa
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