

“To Whom Shall We Go?”

John 6:51-69

On July 21, 2024, First Baptist Church of Mount Vernon, Illinois held its last service. That isn't necessarily unusual – more and more churches are closing every week, especially small, aging, rural churches like that. What made it notable was that their pastor has been notable for his work on religious demographics. Ryan Burge began there in the fall of 2006, while also working on a graduate degree in political science. Since then, he's become an associate professor of political science at Eastern Illinois University and author of "The Nones," a book on the growing number of religiously unaffiliated Americans. For him, the rising number of "nones" and the dwindling number of religious is not simply a statistic, but a fact that he's been witnessing in his own parish for the past 16 years.

In an article he wrote about the closing of his church, he said: “I am having a hard time wrapping my head around the fact that I get asked all the time, by pastors, denominational leaders and interested observers, about ways to grow a church. I guess people assume that since I spend my days digging through religion data, that I should have been able to uncover the secret to getting people back into religion. It takes everything in my power to not say to them, “My church went from 50 people to less than 10 under my watch. If I knew anything about how to grow a church I would have done it by now.”

Today in our Gospel lesson we hear a similar idea, from Jesus Himself, as he watches crowds go away from him. While we spent the summer looking at familiar Sunday School stories that aren't usually a part of the lectionary, the series of readings we hear in worship, we've missed the last few weeks that have focused on John 6.

In this chapter, we find the feeding of the 5000, Jesus walking on water, Jesus comparing himself to Moses who provided manna in the wilderness for the people of Israel during the Exodus, and he begins to talk about the bread of life. There had been some controversy earlier during these teachings. The crowds wanted to make Jesus king, but only in the hopes that he would continue to provide food for them, but they went away when Jesus refused to be their bread king. The hostility grows as those who knew Jesus as the carpenter's son from Nazareth refused to see him as one sent down from heaven. Now, in these closing verses, we get even more hostility. Instead of drawing crowds to him, almost everyone went away, even some of those who had been following him before. “This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?” As his words sank in, one by one the crowd of onlookers and followers slouched away, leaving only the twelve.

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.

"You do not want to leave too, do you?" Jesus asked them in a tone somewhere between plaintiveness and resignation. As usual, Simon Peter spoke up: "Lord, to whom shall we go?" Author Philip Yancey writes "That, for me, is the bottom-line answer to why I stick around. To my shame, I admit that one of the strongest reasons I stay in the fold is the lack of good

alternatives, many of which I have tried. Lord, to whom shall I go? The only thing more difficult than having a relationship with an invisible God is having no such relationship."

But...but at the same time St. John's picture is also one of belief, of courage, and of faith. For as John writes, after many disciples drew back and no longer followed him, "Jesus said to the twelve, 'Will you also go away?' [And] Simon Peter answered him, 'Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.'" Peter, you see, knew where to look. That's it; that's what makes him and the other eleven disciples different--it's not their brains or their ability or their status or even their faith: they simply know where to look. They knew to look to Jesus and they keep their eyes fastened on him. And this, according to many Christians through the centuries, is what makes church, Christians gathering together for worship to hear God's Word and receive God's gifts to us, so important, so vital. Because each and every week, through the preaching of the Word and the sharing of the sacraments, we're offered again the Words of eternal life.

Through preaching and through the sacraments, Jesus' real presence is made manifest in our world, and we are pointed to the one place amid all the tumult and upset of this world and life we share that we can look to and know for sure that we will find God in Christ there...for us.

Martin Luther once said very much the same. "Although [God] is present in all creatures," Luther wrote, "and I might find him in stone, in fire, in water, or even in a rope, for he certainly is there, yet [God] does not wish that I seek him there apart from the Word, and [thereby] cast myself into the fire or the water, or hang myself on the rope. [God] is present everywhere, but does not wish that you grope for him everywhere. Grope rather where the Word is,

and there you will lay hold of [God] in the right way" (LW 36:342).

"Grope where the Word is." What a vivid way to emphasize the importance of the regular gathering of the people of God around the Word of God. Given the challenges we face, I know that preaching and teaching, baptism and communion can seem like small, even paltry things. No wonder disciples then and now had a hard time believing. Yet God has determined to be made most clearly known through neither the grandeur of nature or the accomplishments of humans, but rather through what the Reformers called the "weak" word of the gospel that we might cling to nothing other than God's word in times of plenty or need, in times of celebration or sadness, in times of triumph or despair.

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. But the words of Jesus also bring eternal life. And those words are found nowhere else. Where else could we go?

And so we come together. We come together even as the nones, those who don't believe anything in particular about God, increase in number. We come together even though it seems strange and out of step with our culture. We come together because we know there's nowhere else we can go. This is where God promises to be. This is where God is. And this is where we will be, too.

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