

## Persevering Faith – Kent Dunnington

John 6:56-69

Our Psalm for today is a psalm of the Sons of Korah. I don't know who the Sons of Korah were, but they evidently enjoyed their time in the temple. At one point in the psalm, they get carried away and tell God: "A day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere" (84:10). That has always seemed like a bit of an exaggeration to me. It takes me back to my college days, specifically to chapel. I don't know if people still sing it, but back then there was a popular CCM song drawn from this Psalm, called "Better Is One Day." Don't worry, I'm not going to sing it to you, but the chorus went like this: "Better is one day in your courts/ Better is one day in your house/ Better is one day in your courts/ Than thousands elsewhere." And, of course, you repeat that chorus approximately a hundred times before the song is over. I remember once in chapel, when we were in about the 37<sup>th</sup> refrain, I leaned over to my friend and said, "Better is one day anywhere else than thousands here."

I reveal that, not to draw attention to my own lack of personal piety, but rather because I think it raises an interesting question about the nature of faith. Why is it that, despite the fact that we often do not feel anything happening during worship, that we often cannot even articulate what is supposed to be happening during worship, that we often do not enjoy it, that we even at times find it about the most boring hour of the week—why is it that, despite all of that, we keep coming to church? Perhaps I am just talking to myself here; perhaps most of you experience church the way the Sons of Korah experienced the temple—as pure rapturous delight, a regular explosion of glee, a weekly dose of ecstasy. But I doubt it.

Sometimes church people talk as though it is an astonishing thing that other people don't want to go to church, but our gospel text for today suggests that we should not be surprised by it. Our text is from the end of John chapter six, but before we focus on that passage let's just remind ourselves what has been happening earlier in the chapter. Chapter six starts out with a multitude and a miracle. Five thousand men and the multiplication of five loaves and two fish. Attendance is great. Even the youth are loving it. But then Jesus starts talking about what it all means, saying that he's not going to give out any more bread but that he is all the bread that people really need, and suddenly what was a great megachurch breakout dwindles down to a synagogue-sized congregation of some faithful Jews and some followers of Jesus. But Jesus doesn't take the hint, and he just keeps talking. He claims to have come down from heaven, to be sent by the Father, and to be the one through whom the Father will grant eternal life to those who believe. This is all abstract and confusing stuff, if not downright blasphemous, and before long, even the faithful Jews are not enjoying church very much. They start "murmuring," the text tells us, and they find that they have other places to be as well. Now what began as a multitude of thousands of people has been trimmed down to a band of what the text calls "disciples," still

more than the twelve in the inner circle, but probably not more than a hundred. But Jesus still won't shut up; he doesn't know how to leave well enough alone. He starts talking about this heavenly bread come down from heaven and saying that, if you really want to live eternally, you've got to eat this bread. Now things are just getting weird! The text tells us that the disciples murmured, "Who can listen to this (RSV 6:60)?" And so, the text tells us, "many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him" (6:66).

And this left only the Twelve. Jesus started with a multitude and is left with twelve followers. He started out with a megachurch and ended up with a small group. How's that for church growth? And yet, Jesus does not seem at all bewildered by this chain of events. He seems to expect it and even to predict it when he says to the larger group of disciples, "Among you there are some who do not believe" (6:64). There is no pleading here, no cajoling, no catering to group interests. Just a simple statement of fact: some of you claim to be my disciples, but you are not. You even think yourself disciples, but you are right now being confronted with the reality that you are not my disciples, that you are not willing to walk with me this road that I am calling you down. And he was right: one by one those who had called themselves disciples slipped out the back door, returning to their former lives, unable or unwilling to abide any longer with this man Jesus.

And so there are twelve left, and now Jesus turns to them and asks, "Do you also wish to go away" (6:67)? How can this question not create a profound uneasiness within those of us who purport to be Jesus' disciples? Who, hearing this text, can help but ask about his or her own place in this story (Brueggeman)? "Do you also wish to go away?"

We do well to pause here and sit with this question. If we are honest enough to hear it, we too are being sifted by the severity of Christ's call. Perhaps, like the multitude, your attachment to Jesus will be tested when Jesus does not give you the worldly goods that you desire. You follow Jesus because you want to be healed, or because you want another person to like you, or because you want your family to be secure. When you are chronically ill, or heartbroken, or bankrupt, you will face Jesus' question: Do you also wish to go away?

Perhaps, like the Jews, your attachment to Jesus will be tested when you are confronted with Christ's claim to be more than just a spiritual teacher, more than just one prophet among others, but to be in fact the one and only God of the universe. Is it not an inexcusable presumption for me to proclaim Jesus Christ not merely as one among many witnesses for the truth, but as the one and only witness confronting all people with an absolute claim to allegiance (Barth)? How arrogant, intolerant, and narrow-minded this all sounds. Can I say this? Can I believe this? You are facing Jesus' question: Do you also wish to go away?

Perhaps, like the larger band of disciples, your attachment to Jesus will be tested when you are confronted with the realization that Christ's absolute lordship is not only an intellectual commitment but a moral calling, that Christ's call to abide in him is nothing less than death to our very selves, a willing relinquishment of our cherished identities, and a subordination of

everything in our lives to the purposes of God. What about me? My purposes? My ambitions? My image? My identity? Why should I abandon myself to this one man? Why should I not give at least a little honor to my own hopes and dreams alongside and in opposition to his (Barth)? You are facing Jesus' question: Do you also wish to go away?

Indeed, as the disciples exclaimed, "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it" (6:60). And so now Jesus turns to the twelve who remain, and asks this ultimate question: "Do you also wish to go away?" Simon Peter, as he often does, steps forward as a spokesman for the twelve. And I want to suggest that his response contains for us today an answer to the question with which we began, that is, the question of why some of us will come to church, Sunday after Sunday, year after year, for the rest of our lives, when so many others feel they have better things to do with their time. The only possible answer to this question is the one that Peter gives. "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). In closing, let me just suggest what these words tell us about the nature of authentic and persevering faith.

First, authentic and persevering faith takes root whenever the desire for that which is eternal takes precedent in our lives. As creatures created in God's image, we all desire the eternal. We are finite creatures with infinite desire. We all experience this mysterious need to go where we know that it is humanly impossible to go and this mysterious yearning for a peace, a beauty, and a loving fellowship that we know it is humanly impossible to achieve. In John's terms, this is called the search for eternal life. And yet we are afraid to trust that that desire, that need, and that yearning really does indicate to us our true destiny. Faith in Christ takes root when we are confronted by this man who speaks as if from this beyond, and when the authority of his testimony overrides our fear that our desires have no final satisfaction.

Second, authentic and persevering faith is characterized by desperate trust. It is important to acknowledge that we really do not know very much about what we want. We know that we want perfect friendship, perfect peace, perfect joy. But we really do not know what that would look like. That is why so many take offense at Jesus—they have failed to realize that eternal life is beyond the horizons of human possibility and therefore that the path to eternal life may trace the most unexpected and least likely of trajectories. How, for instance, could a cross have anything to do with the journey to eternal life? It seems like a bit of a backtrack. And yet that is the confounding call of Christ. I think this is why Peter begins his testimony with the desperate admission, "Lord, to whom can we go?" There is a kind of desperation in authentic and persevering faith. We know that we desire eternal life, and we know that Jesus Christ speaks the words of eternal life. And yet, those words are often so hard, so mystifying, so contrary to how we would have set things up. But, to whom else can we go? No one else speaks the words of eternal life. We have tried other masters, other paths to spiritual enlightenment. We have even tried to squelch our desire for the eternal through distraction, through sloth, and through sensual indulgence. And yet, we have found that our desire for the eternal cannot be ignored and, having been confronted by God in this man Jesus, we have found that the witness of this man awakens within us new life, lifts us toward another world, and draws us near to the heart of

God. And thus, despite all of the suffering, the perplexity, the long dark nights of doubt that faith brings, we find ourselves echoing Peter's words: Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.

Finally, authentic and persevering faith is marked by a deep and abiding confidence in the truth of the gospel. The word that John uses for this confidence is "knowledge." It is a popular cliché to say that faith and knowledge are incompatible: if you know something, the saying goes, then you wouldn't need to have faith in it. As a philosophical comment on the way that belief and knowledge statements usually work, this is true. But, biblically, it doesn't hold up. Otherwise, how could Peter say, "We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God?" And how could the saints of old speak of "the certainty of faith?" The confusion comes from thinking that faith in God is a human achievement, something that we might reach through the accumulation of evidence or something like that. But of course that is not how faith works. Faith is, in the end, not something that we can achieve but it is a gift from God. This is what Jesus means when he says that "no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father" (6:65). Faith is a mystery, which is the theological way of saying that it is not something that can be controlled from the human side but can only be received as gift from a generous God.

So this is the shape of authentic and persevering faith: if, despite all of our fears, we will trust that our deepest desires tell us something about our destiny; and if, despite all of our doubts, we will continually place ourselves at the feet of Jesus; we will find that God, in his time and in his mercy, will take hold of us and impart to us a faith that is able to stand the tests of time and temptation and even treachery. This is a promise: "For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened" (RSV Matt. 7:8).

So this is why we come to church. We come to church because we have infinite desires, and we want to learn the words to describe what it is that we really want. We come to church because we have nowhere else to turn; all other ground, we have found, is sinking sand. We come to church because we can't help it: we know that here we may meet the Holy One of God. And we come to church to pass the peace, to eat the bread, and to drink the cup, all of which is an anticipation of that unimaginable day when we will see God face to face. On that day, when we see God face to face, we will sing with the Sons of Korah, "Better is one day in your courts than thousands elsewhere." And then, we will not be exaggerating. Amen.