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1 Kings 8:1, 6, 10-11)

Ephesians 6:10-20

John 6:56-69

The gospel from last week has Jesus talking to his followers in the synagogue at Capernaum. He said, "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me." So, we have a clear reference to the Eucharist, made by Jesus himself. And once again, as he does elsewhere in the gospel of John, he refers to his being sent by the Father.

Today, his followers respond to his claim that he was sent by the Father, that his followers will eat his flesh and drink his blood. They say, "This teaching is difficult. Who can accept it?" Jesus responds, "Does this offend you? Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before?" When he had said this, at this point, the gospel today records that many of his followers turned away and no longer followed him. Jesus turned to the 12, and asked, "Do you also wish to go away?"

Peter answered, "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."

It was a poignant moment in the history of all of us who would follow Jesus Christ.

There are no miracles reported in these gospel readings. No healings. No raising anyone from the dead. No changing of water into wine. No feeding of thousands of people.

No calming a storm with a few words. There is no emphasis on Jesus' relationships with his followers. No mention that he loves them, or that he will always be with them. There is only the reiteration of his astonishing claim that he is sent from God, that he is the Son of God. And then, there is the teaching that "those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them."

For the followers of Jesus in the first century, it all came down to this acid test. They had witnessed the miracles, the healings. Perhaps most of them had come to love this man. But here, in many of their minds, he was asking them to go too far. He was asking them to believe in something too incredible, that he was on the same level with God, that his followers would eat his flesh and drink his blood. For Judaism, it was blasphemy, pure and simple, to claim to be on the same level as God. And so, for any Jew, to give ascent to this claim and this teaching meant that one really had decided on a completely different life, a life apart from traditional Judaism, a life apart from the traditions of ancestors, and in some cases I am sure, a life apart from one's immediate family. And for many of Jesus' followers in the first century, they simply would not do it.

Apart from the wonder of his miracles, apart from the closeness of the following community, when it came time to take a new step toward radical faith, many of his followers would not. And I am sure that many of them felt that they could not.

For Jesus, it was one of those times when he "came out" to people. In today's gospel, he would not perform acts that would merely indicate who he was. Here he would simply say, "I am of God. My followers will eat my flesh, and drink my blood."

So, we can understand that he would at this time turn to the 12, whom he had specifically called as disciples, and ask them, “Do you also wish to go away? Or now that I have said clearly and without reservation who I am, and these others have left, do you also wish to go away?” In reading this gospel reading, if one reads it several times, it is possible to discern an atmosphere of pathos that begins with this question. Did Jesus expect that the 12 would abandon him because he clearly came out about who he was? We do not know for sure.

It is in this atmosphere of pathos, of things indicated, but not spoken, that Peter utters one of the most remarkable confessions of faith in scripture. He says in answer to Jesus’ question, “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.” It is my opinion that this affirmation became part of the worship and liturgy of the early church. The statement is remarkable in that it came as many followers turned away. It is remarkable because it is not in direct response to one of Jesus’ wonders, a miracle or a healing of some sort. It is remarkable because, for a majority of the 12, it came, not as a result of any one act that Jesus had done. It came as a result of their association with him. So Peter, in looking back over all their associations with Jesus, says, “We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.”

For Peter, and for most of the 12, they had been here before. In their association with Jesus, they had believed, doubted, and believed again. They had questioned from understanding and confusion. In the context of their relationship with Jesus, in the context of their work of believing in him, they had reached a crossroads, an intersection. No longer was their believing confined to responding to what miraculous things Jesus did. Their believing was more about who Jesus claimed to be, the Son of God. For many of them, on that day in Capernaum, perhaps they saw him more clearly than they had ever seen him. “We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.”

For Peter, and for most of the 12, except perhaps the one who would betray him, they had taken a step beyond those who chose not to follow any more. Because of their association with Jesus, when they heard him make the claim to be sent of God, when they heard him say his followers would eat his flesh and drink his blood, they were able to believe and know that he was the Holy One of God.

And so it is with us in our lives. As followers of Christ, we reach a point or points where a radical next step of faith is possible. As we partake of the Eucharist, pray the prayers, sing the hymns, read the scripture, reflect and pray in private, reflect and pray in public, we reach a crossroads. As we live our lives inside and outside the walls of the church, we come to the threshold of immense possibility in Christ.

As a faith community, the Anglican communion is a fertile ground for this kind of possibility. As part of the Anglican communion, in our lives in this faith community, there is a rhythm in our comings and goings.

And in the rhythm found in the regular pulse of our liturgy, we come here regularly to reaffirm our faith together, to pray together, to hear the Word of God together, to sing, and to participate in the body and blood of Jesus Christ.

But then we go out, into the world, into our jobs, our schools, our neighborhoods, among family, co-workers, and friends. And perhaps we find that the world is not so ready to affirm a faith in Jesus Christ. It may be that we find the world would relegate the Christian faith to one choice among many choices. But then, we come back here again, to reaffirm, to confess, to participate. Within the tension created by these rhythmic comings and goings, we will find in ourselves the work of believing. Called as the church to confess the faith, to proclaim the truth of Christ, to celebrate the Eucharist together. And, at the same time, part of a culture that encourages Christians to be non-distinctive. This distinctiveness of Christ is something that the former Archbishop of Canterbury, George Carey, calls the singularity of Christ. We could say wrestling with the singularity of Christ is at once undesirable and embarrassing. And yet, there are people in the New Testament who wrestled with Jesus' claims. And there have been people in all centuries since then who have wrestled with his singularity. Probably all of us in one way or another wrestle with the singularity of Christ. I guess the real question is, where does the wrestling lead a person? If there is wrestling, then there is tension.

For the disciples, in the midst of their association with him, there was that tension, that wrestling. And for them the tension led to a new spiritual place.

In the midst of that tension, in that work of believing, someday, maybe soon, maybe not, we may come to a crossroads. And Jesus may come to us in a new and unique way. It might come in a conversation, in a prayer, at church, at work, at home. In a moment, over a day or a week. Somewhere in the events and encounters of our lives. And we may see him more clearly than we have ever seen him.

On that day, out of our association with him, we will have the chance to take the next step of faith, to follow him, not just because of what he has done, or what he does, but because of who he is. Then we will know that in some inexplicable and marvelous way, that it is he who has the words of eternal life.

Then we will have come to believe and know that he is the Holy One of God. Amen.