

Well, it's coming to that time of year. Back to school. And there is something that every teacher knows right away as soon as they enter the class. As soon as they begin to teach. That in a room full of students there are always going to be the ones who seem to get it, who are nodding, and writing things down and making those mental notes, and putting the pieces together along the way. And then there are those who are pretending to get it. Who, if you look at them, you can see them earnestly paying attention—that maybe they really want to get it anyway. And then there are those in the room who leave with that dazed and confused look, the ones the teachers know that no matter how hard they try to get the message across, just aren't getting it.

And it's not just as simple as some kids are smarter than others. Because some may have experience with the subject matter already. Or it may be the circumstances in life with which they came, the million other things that are on their brain. The argument they had with their sister. That they are on the move again between blended families where one week they are with Mom and one week they are with Dad. Or someone is being bullied. Or someone else has come with an empty stomach; from a home with empty cupboards and an empty fridge. Or maybe they saw a newsfeed on their phone where all news is bad news—where images of an earthquake in Haiti, or terrified Afghani citizens pouring onto runways and packed into cargo planes trying to escape a terrorist regime. Or maybe it's squabbling politicians who can only point fingers and tear one another apart in a race for a federal election while the uncertainty of COVID and unemployment seem to take a back seat. So sometimes, it's not about who's smarter than whom; it might just be what they came with that day, and a

message being taught that is so counter-cultural to their experience that it just doesn't make any sense. So maybe all of this might give us a little perspective as we come to the end of what is now for us the fourth and final week of the sermon Jesus preaches on bread. The crowd who has come that day? The ones who have been bullied. The ones who are different. The sick. The poor. The ones from broken homes. Divorced women with children. The hungry. And in some way all of them, trying to flee a culture, a regime, that holds them captive and oppressed. A culture that is short on gracious words. A culture where the weak are preyed on by the strong, where to the victor go all the spoils.

And it's not that they aren't trying to get it. Some of them even ask a question or two about bread, and bread from heaven, and manna, and the thing they know and how these things might relate. And they might even whisper to one another about what a good preacher Jesus is, but really we wish he would hurry up and give us another miracle or two; and some more of that tasty bread. But you can see it on their faces, sitting there scratching their heads, looking dazed and confused. And who wouldn't be. Because in what amounts to just a few sentences, bread for their bellies has become bread from heaven, bread that is the flesh and blood of Jesus and they must eat of his flesh and his blood, or, no life for you, that's it; that's all! Well, frankly none of it makes any sense! Because doesn't that mean that you would have to die Jesus? And that puts none of us better off than we were before. So, we don't get it, Jesus. This is a hard teaching.

Is it any wonder they turn away? From the beginning we have sized up this classroom, we already knew who was going to flunk out, didn't we? Well, and maybe we want to just write them off. To say that they weren't smart enough. Weren't spiritual enough. That they hadn't been around Jesus long enough. That they had too many other things on their minds. And they did. They had come with their hunger and homelessness and disease and longing. From a culture seriously lacking in words of grace and life. Oddly it is back to that culture they now turn. But now it wasn't just the sick, and the poor, and the hungry, it wasn't just these who were turning away.

Well, pay attention class. Because it may surprise you to see who is leaving next. Now it is not only the sick, the poor, the hungry, it wasn't just these who were turning away. It was disciples. Ok. Relax. Not the 12. But disciples, none the less. Good students. Ones who have followed Jesus from the start. Ones who understand his teachings, who had called him teacher and rabbi, who called him Lord. And maybe some of them pretended in the beginning, making notes, putting the pieces together, "Oh, yes, we see Jesus, your flesh is the bread of life for the world. Yes, that makes perfect sense. We get it. No need to go on." But now they grumbled too. They too were offended. Shouldn't at least these have understood? But not even to these can Jesus get the message across. Jesus can't even get his own followers to understand.

Or maybe they do understand. But it hits too close to home, is too counter-cultural in a world of weak and strong on which they have based even their own identity and way of being. Because to feed and heal is not merely incidental action, but

action that brings in the reign of God in ways they could never expect. And their own ways of being will need to change. To follow is to identify with the weak and lowly; it is life that raises up instead of tearing down the lives of others. That to participate in the flesh and blood of Jesus means to die to all the ways of this world's political squabbling and vying for power that ignores the places of hunger and death. That the flesh and blood of Jesus given for the life of the world are so opposed to and so opposed by the very forces of death; it would lead all the way to the cross and the grave.

“Does this offend you?” Jesus asks, not of the crowd, but of his disciples. “If you are scandalized by this, what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending? If you are scandalized by this, just wait until you see me raised on a cross, to give my flesh and blood for the life of the world in this very same way. And they are offended. And one by one by one, they all turn away, until only the twelve remain. Because it *is* a difficult teaching. And our natural inclination is turn and leave, to avoid the difficult call. To avoid the cross at all cost. To avoid anything that looks like our death at all cost. To protect ourselves, our lives at all cost, even at the expense of the lives of others.

And now, after weeks long of trying to understand what this bread sermon is all about, in the end it is a deflated Jesus we are left with—one who almost begs for the loyalty of the few of those disciples who remain. “And what about you? Will you also turn away?” Well, thank goodness for Peter who can redeem this story; redeem us all with a quick response, where he takes it upon himself to answer for all the disciples—and for us too. “Where else can we go, Jesus, you have the words of eternal life.” And

while we almost congratulate Peter for how smart he is, for his understanding, for the depth of his faith and spirituality—while we too, long to be the faithful Peters of this story—Peter’s hasty decision about following Jesus is as incomplete and as much lacking in understanding as all those who have already turned away. He doesn’t know the life Jesus gives comes through the cross and grave. And none yet understand the surprise of life beyond the grave. Meanwhile Jesus knows Peter’s bold declaration will only go so far. That it will not only be Judas who turns away. But each and every disciple. And Peter, who when it comes to the cross will turn anywhere else but to Jesus. Everywhere else but to the gracious, Word of eternal life. When faced with the cross, Peter turns to his own words, “I don’t know him,” to the human solution that presumes we are strong, that we will survive, that we can live when we can separate ourselves from those we name weak, or don’t live up to our expectations. But there is no life in these words, no life in our words; as much as we think; our human solutions are not grace-filled, not life-giving. Still it is where we turn.

“Does this offend us?” I guess that it does. Because we want to be a people who align ourselves with Peter, to speak those soaring words of faith. But in the end, it is a difficult teaching we are left with. That it is not only our politicians who are quick to criticize and tear each other down. It is us too; that we buy into the whole basis of our culture and of our identity that makes us appear strong only when someone else is weak. That we are a culture and people who thrive on the scarcity of gracious words. It is nothing new. In Ephesians, Paul—famed preacher and evangelist—admits his own difficulty with speaking gracious words. “Pray for me,” he asks, “that I may have

the words, that I may speak the gospel a.k.a. words of grace boldly. That I would have words of grace to speak.” And in that same passage Paul speaks of the armor of God, the only offensive weapon is the sword, “so that we might proclaim the gospel of peace.” This speaking of gracious words, words of life, is a difficult thing. Because if the weakness of the cross offends us—and it does—if it offends us that God dies; perhaps it offends us even more that God rises from the dead. That Jesus is raised, changes the whole basis for our worldview of our identity, of how we see ourselves and others—the whole basis for our lives has been, is and is forever changed because Jesus has been raised from the dead. Into our world so short on gracious words, Jesus is Word, Jesus is Bread, Jesus is Flesh and Blood. Jesus is Life spoken, broken, given, eaten for the life of all people. For the resurrected life of all the world. “Eat of this Bread.’ Jesus says. “Eat of my Flesh. Drink of my blood. For I AM.”

And Jesus says, “I AM.” Whether, if, when we turn away. Whether we pretend to understand, even when we don’t. When we are offended. In the midst of the troubles of the world and all those who say that God does not come into all the places of our hunger and longing and sickness and pain. Into our broken homes and broken relationships. Into our earthquakes and fires and drought and war. None of this stops Jesus from giving his life. Nothing stops Jesus from turning all our definitions upside down, nothing stops Jesus from upending all our human solutions, from upending the grave, nothing stops Jesus from rising from the dead. From raising life from the dead. Jesus says, “I AM.” And we are. We are resurrected people. Easter people. Raised from the dead. Sent in the life of Christ. Where else can we go?