

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be reflections of your word to us today, in Christ's name we pray. Amen

I've been thinking about Harold a lot, partly because it's still hard to believe he's gone . . . but also because his service is coming up this week. If you're there on Wednesday, you're 100% going to hear me say this again . . . Harold would sometimes say to me about that morning's scripture after church, "why was this story included?" "Why was it told in this way?" "What was going on in John's community that made this story important to tell?" – particularly when we consider challenging phrases like "no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father," it's good to ask, why is John telling this story? . . . there must be a reason. Before we see what history can tell us, let's look at what else is in the text.

Did you notice in the reading how all the dialogue in this last section is basically about who, after hearing this discourse, is going to continue following Jesus, and who is not? Now that Jesus has fed each one of them, he's explained that the bread they're really seeking is living bread that fills us and renews us continually, and not only that, Jesus is this bread . . . not in some vague, disembodied kind of way, rather, as we explored last week, it is exactly his flesh, his incarnation: his presence, teaching and ministry is the sustenance we seek. John's Jesus takes the time to lay it all out there, to and let the people respond.

When many of his disciples heard it, they said, "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?" I say to them, yes, it's difficult. As one who has wrestled with these texts over the past 5 weeks like Jacob wrestled with God, I affirm, it's difficult. NT Wright says "this new teaching is 'difficult' in the sense that it is demanding not just to get your mind around, but to get your heart and soul into it."¹ "[Jesus] is urging his hearers, as he has been doing all along, to go beyond a one-dimensional understanding of what he is doing and saying . . . he's urging people to break through to listen to the Word within the flesh."²

¹ Wright, NT. John for Everyone. 89.

² NT Wright, 91

Not everyone wants to do it. Jesus asks those who question him, “does this offend you?” Or better translated, does this scandalize you, meaning, does this cause you to sin or separate yourself from God, rather than bring you closer. Granted, sometimes it’s difficult to tell the difference between being cut off from God and walking through the wilderness that leads us to new life. Those who complain are quite right; it’s difficult to get one’s mind, heart and soul, around Jesus’ teaching, particularly without looking at beliefs, values, world view, and even one’s image of God . Looking at the world through Jesus’ lens might challenge one’s very way of life.

And others say, “to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.” They don’t say it’s easy; they don’t say there isn’t a cost; they don’t say they can see where the path will lead . . . they simply affirm that there is no other choice for them. The Way of Jesus is the source of eternal life, the promise of continual provision.

All of the dialogue in this text is centered around this choice. Who is going to follow Jesus and who is going to walk away? I wonder who in John’s community were faced with this same decision. For some decades before John wrote his gospel, there weren’t people who called themselves Christians. Everyone was Jewish and some Jews followed the Way of Jesus as part of their Jewish practice. Everyone went to synagogue together . . . until the late 80’s CE . . . I’m sure it didn’t happen all at once, but there was a separation between Judaism and the budding Christian faith. Did they disagree over theology? Over practice? Over Eucharist? Did some proclaim Jesus as the bread of life? Whatever the cause, after 50 some years of worshipping together, those who followed the Way were no longer welcome in the synagogue. It is possible . . . and I dare say it would make a lot of sense . . . that the gospel of John, which was written around the turn of the century, perhaps another 10 years later, actually reflects this split.³ It’s possible that we see the emotion of this process is reflected in this text where Jesus’ disciples make a choice to stay or to go . . . the scene even takes place in the synagogue.

³ Spong. Re-Claiming the bible for a Non-Religious World.

Let me be clear, I'm not saying Christians made the right choice and Jews made the wrong one. Everyone was Jewish. People made their choices and navigated their way forward . . . IF the text is an indication, there were very strong feelings about it all . . . and it's understandable because their relationship with God mattered.

As we wrap up this series, this is certainly a truth that resonates through time . . . our relationship with God matters. It matters all the time . . . and feels a bit more critical when we live through challenging and tumultuous times. Perhaps this is even a good time to wrestle with the words of Jesus and explore what it means to take our faith from our heads to our hearts. Or deepen the faith of our souls? Is there an element of your life or the life of the world that aches for deeper faith? There is plenty in us and the world right now that cries out for God's presence. There is plenty that makes us feel like we're walking around in the dark. So much so, that claiming God's provision may feel less like a choice and more of a necessity for life.

Hear these words from St. John of the Cross . . .

For I know well the spring that flows and runs, although it is night.

That eternal spring is hidden,
for I know well where it has its rise,
although it is night.

I do not know its origin, nor has it one,
but I know that every origin has come from it,
although it is night.

I know that nothing else is so beautiful,
and that the heavens and the earth drink there,
although it is night.

(next slide)

I know well that it is bottomless
and no one is able to cross it,
although it is night.

I know that its streams are so brimming
they water
the lands of hell, the heavens, and earth,
although it is night.

I know well the stream that flows
from this spring is mighty in compass and power,
although it is night.

I know the stream proceeding from these two,
that neither of them in fact precedes it,
although it is night.

This eternal spring is hidden
in this living bread for our life's sake,
although it is night.

(next slide)

It is here calling out to creatures;

and they satisfy their thirst,
although in darkness, because it is night.

This living spring that I long for,
I see in this bread of life,
although it is night.

Jesus stands before you, holding a piece of bread, saying this is the bread of life, food for the journey.