

## THE REMNANT

Pentecost 14-B

August 26, 2018

John 6:56-69

“The Holy One of God.” This is Peter’s confession. Peter, who was quick to speak (sometimes too quick, sometimes without really thinking things through) speaks for the disciples, that is to say, “the remnant” that we hear referred to as *the Twelve*: “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.”

As we come to the end of the “bread of life” passages from the sixth chapter of John’s gospel, we land on Peter’s confession. Yes, there are two remaining verses after the appointed reading, verses where Jesus directly addresses his choosing the disciples, and he knows that one among them is “a devil.” It is unlike the references (“Get behind me Satan!”) that addressed Peter in Matthew’s and Mark’s gospels [Matthew 16:23 and Mark 8:33] when Peter rebuked Jesus for his “negative talk” of suffering and death. Without speaking the name, we know (and the evangelist tells us) that Jesus is talking about Judas this time.

Now, as we come back to Peter’s confession we realize that we’ve come full circle. Peter isn’t called “Satan” anymore, because Peter *gets it* this time. Jesus truly is the Holy One of God; and that means that anything is possible—even Jesus rising to be reunited with the Father. The last time we heard anyone address Jesus in this way (as the “Holy One”) was the demon at Capernaum declaring: “I know who you are, the Holy One of God!” [Mark 1:24]

Today, Peter knows—together, it would appear, with the rest of the Twelve, just who Jesus is. Yet the circle of believers remaining is shrinking. Jesus’ talk of flesh/blood, death/life, and ascending/descending is too much, too difficult to imagine. Perhaps the cost of discipleship, of hanging around this Jesus, seems to be too much. Those who came for the meals and the healing apparently weren’t ready for this level of commitment.

Many left Jesus in those days, and I wondered why people leave the church today. Why do people fall away? There are lots of reasons and excuses given. “The church always asks for money.” “I’m not being ‘fed.’” “The pastor said something I didn’t like.” “The synod did \_\_\_\_\_” or “The ELCA voted to \_\_\_\_\_.” Those might be valid. But it occurred to me that no one ever says, “I’m just not that committed; I think Jesus is asking too much of me.” Yet I think that’s a valid fear and might be a very real underlying reason for people drifting away from the fold. Committing to Jesus by living a Christlike life, loving our enemies, caring for the stranger in our midst, treating others as we would treat Jesus is hard work; if we’re honest, maybe *many of us* don’t feel quite ready for all of that.

If you read closely, if you read carefully, you might discover that Jesus isn’t merely asking for a lifetime commitment, but a *life* commitment. That means letting go of things and ideas in which we’ve placed our trust. People turn away like the man who shook his head when Jesus told him to sell all that he had. Loving and trusting Jesus means that we are called to risk ourselves and to place our lives into a future that is not only uncertain, but likely contradicts everything we’ve planned. It calls into question much of what we have come to count on. Being faithful to the gospel means we might have to speak and make decisions that are moral, but not popular. To paraphrase the disciples: “These are difficult teachings: Who can accept them?” No wonder the crowds were offended at Jesus. The questions, the demands, were too hard.

David Lose echoes Jesus' question: "Are we able to accept this?" But he goes farther: "Can we confess it? Peter responds, almost in desperation, as the Evangelist would have us respond: '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.' If that at times feels difficult to say, or if at times it is easy to say but later proves hard to live, take heart—these words are said by Peter who denies him in the presence of other disciples who remained with Jesus in this scene yet deserted him at the cross. Indeed, we can come to Jesus only through the power of God. Or, to paraphrase Martin Luther's explanation of the third article of the creed: 'I believe I cannot believe—thank God for the gift of the Holy Spirit.'" ["Dear Working Preacher," July 23, 2012: [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org)]

The Spirit that helps us come to believe, Luther explains, calls, gathers, enlightens, and makes us holy. That is, God chooses and uses us with our varied gifts and talents—even our flaws. The very Spirit that helps us to believe also shapes us to be disciples. That is what Jesus did with the Twelve. I believe that, in spite of what Jesus taught and what the gospels remind us, people think that following Jesus means they must immediately achieve a status of perfect obedience. To this day, people still fail to hear the word of grace that calls in spite of the fact that we fall short.

As the gospels reveal, even the Twelve were far from perfect. Yet this was the group of disciples that remained. These were the ones who were committed to completing this journey with Jesus. Yes, Judas betrayed, and Peter denied, and most of the others scattered when confronted with the arrest and trial of Jesus. And, if we're honest, we know we probably would not do much better.

But these "bread of life" moments and the whole of Scripture remind us that there is hope. We are a *called* community, and when we gather in worship—in prayer, praise, and proclamation—we remember that *we are* community. We are far from being left alone. The community comes together to commune on Jesus; and in doing so, the Holy One surrounds us as we surround the Table. Not only is Jesus with us in this meal; he has brought the whole company of saints as well.

The one who fed thousands and healed the multitudes reaches out to us, today. In the bread we eat, we receive the sign of his presence. In the wine, our tongues as moistened even as we recall Jesus' own words on the cross: "I thirst." And in fellowship together we give thanks that this faith has come to us—to bring us together, to give us comfort and strength, and even to get us through our times of sorrow and doubt. We are strengthened by the assurance that God in Jesus has the last word over us. And that word is good news. He offers the words—the authority—of life: eternal life. Lord, to whom can we go? To you, Lord. To you. Call us, lead us, and help us to remain with you. Amen.