

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
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21st Sunday in Ordinary Time
John 6:56-71

What's So Hard About Being a Christian?

It's about the worst attrition rate I've ever heard of. At the beginning of John chapter 6, Jesus had 5000 followers, 5000 people who came to hear him teach and then shared in the miracle of the multiplied loaves and fishes. At the end of the chapter, he has 11 true disciples. What happened? What made so many people fall away?

This morning I will start with a basic Bible lesson about the four gospels. John's gospel is different from the other three gospels. Scholars call Matthew, Mark and Luke the "synoptic gospels," meaning "same eyes," and those three writers often tell the stories of Jesus with the same words. There are differences, but there are many similarities. But not with John. John has a distinctive style, a distinctive perspective, and a different set of stories.

Of all of Jesus' miracles, only one is recorded by all four gospels, and that is the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves, the feeding of the multitude. But where Matthew, Mark and Luke tell this story and then move on to the next episode, John devotes an entire chapter to reflecting on the meaning of the miracle. This is John's usual pattern: a story, then a discourse from Jesus which reveals that what happened is a sign revealing something important to understand about Jesus. And because he wrote as many as 50 or 60 years after Jesus' death and resurrection, and because his primary purpose in writing was to persuade people to have faith in Jesus, these discourses contain elements which address the questions and controversies of those 50 or 60 years of intervening history. John's gospel is not primarily a chronicle of historical events; instead, it is a book intended to proclaim and persuade. The incidents of Jesus' life are told as illustrations of the great themes that John wants us to hear.

And the theme that Jesus is the bread of life, the true bread who came down from heaven for the life of the world, evidently was something that not everyone could swallow. So John tells us that 5000 followers dwindled to 11. But John wants his readers—including us—to be true disciples, not the kind who'll accept a free meal and then drift away. So the conclusion of this "bread of life" reflection is a call to Christian discipleship. And, this discourse reminds us, it is a strange and difficult calling.

For those in the first century, part of the strangeness lay in the weird language around the eucharist, the Lord's Supper. Eat this bread—it is the flesh of Christ. Drink this wine—it is the blood of Christ. In the early centuries of the church, Christians were sometimes accused of cannibalism. After all, they ate the flesh and drank the blood of the child of God—infant cannibalism, no less! The language is strange today, too. An Episcopal priest who blogs as "the country parson" says that this is a "cannibal Sunday" and he hopes that no visitors stray into his parish wanting to see what Christianity is all about, because he'll have trouble explaining. (<http://countyparson.blogspot.com/2009/08/cannibal-sundays.html>) Why does Jesus talk this way? It offended the Jews who never ate the blood of an animal, as well as the Gentiles who might have heard that the devil was a "flesh-eater." And John admits that this teaching was responsible for the terrible attrition rate among the

disciples. Maybe they just couldn't see past the literal words to grasp the symbolic meaning.

But what if they could. What if they heard his message, but it simply wasn't what they wanted to hear. Maybe the reason Jesus wouldn't put it into other words, sanitize the language, make it more politically correct was that he wanted his followers to know the truth of his way. And they understood, but just didn't want to hear that Jesus, their wonder-working, powerful-preaching, liberating Messiah was heading towards death, towards sacrificing his body and blood for the life of the world. The opposition to Jesus was beginning to rear its ugly head, foreshadowing what was to come. Christ's exhortation to eat his flesh and drink his blood a call to take up the cross and follow, the call to discipleship that Matthew, Mark and Luke record. Maybe so many Jesus groupies fell away because they were hoping for an easy road to salvation and Jesus was telling them that his path is a hard one, a bloody one, one with consequences that would hurt before they healed.

It is hard to be a Christian because that means following Christ, whose way of living in the world was to live and to die for others. He walked the road of truth and love until the world couldn't take it any longer, and so the powers that be hung him on a cross and killed him. It is hard to be a Christian because that means emulating a leader who by all worldly measures failed. He failed to impress the rich and the powerful. He attracted the poor and the lowly, lepers and women and children and those who were blind and lame and mentally ill. And when he gathered a large crowd of disciples around him, he didn't keep them, or grow them. He lost them by saying too much about himself. At this point in the story, Jesus looks like a loser.

But something happened to turn his story around. Something dramatic must have happened, because here we are, nearly 2000 years later, and we still want to know more about him. We still seek to believe, and to follow, and to be counted among his true disciples. Though we may have our doubts, and though our struggles in life might make us question, "Is Jesus really Lord and Savior?" we're here because something, somehow, some way has drawn us to know and be known by him. In the synoptic gospels, when Jesus told his friends of the way of the cross he then asked, "Who do you say that I am?" In John's gospel, he speaks of his flesh and blood giving life, and then asks the inner circle, "Do you also wish to go away?"

Well, do you? Are you afraid to eat his flesh and drink his blood, to travel on the way which means suffering and sacrifice, to live your life for others? Do you also wish to go away?

Simon Peter speaks for the true disciples. "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." Simon Peter speaks for the true disciples. Does he speak for you?

True disciples don't have all the answers, but they know the most important thing of all. The most important thing about being a disciple is having a relationship with Jesus Christ. Not obedience to rules, not learning, not stars in your crown, not perfect attendance or years of service or offices held or souls saved. The most important thing about being a true disciple is having a relationship with Jesus Christ that won't give up when things get

rough. When 4989 others leave, a true disciple says “Where else could I go? Lord, you have the words of eternal life, and I’m staying with you.” A true disciple says, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God. And we have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.” A true disciple believes, and lives that belief, because of a relationship that is too good to give up no matter what. Discipleship begins by committing to a relationship with Christ.

And what’s so hard about that?

Michael Foss, pastor of Prince of Peace Lutheran Church in Burnsville, Minnesota, has a thesis (that he has put into practice) that what today’s churches need is a paradigm shift. Oh you’re right, everyone talks about a paradigm shift! He proposes shifting our emphasis from membership to discipleship. Church membership has become increasingly meaningless in American society, the world has changed faster than the church, and people are drifting away. Foss says that’s because churches are still focused on growing their membership instead of growing disciples. We think that 5000 people getting their needs met is the goal. It’s not. Eleven true disciples changed the world. Our goal is to be true disciples, and to make true disciples. The Great Commission is not “Go into the world and make members,” it’s “Go into the world and make disciples. . . .”

Being a disciple starts with a relationship with Jesus Christ. And then it gets really radical. At Prince of Peace church, there are six foundational practices, and everyone is expected to commit to them. They want to be a high expectation church, where the Spirit surges among them. Are you ready for these six practices? You might want to take notes, since you’ve probably never heard these before.

1. **Pray** daily
2. **Worship** weekly (72% of Americans polled say they are church members, and about 40% say they attended worship in a given week, but recent studies indicate that many people lie about this, and the real percentage is more like 25%)
3. **Read** the Bible (91% of American households have one; 38% of adults say that they read one in any given week. I don’t know if they’re telling the truth or not.)
4. **Serve** at and beyond my church (that is a mark of Christian discipleship, isn’t it?)
5. Be in **Relationship** to encourage spiritual growth in others (community matters!)
6. **Give** of my time, talents and resources.

(Michael W. Foss, 2000, *Power Surge*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, p. 89)

Wow. They aren’t new and radical, aren’t they? **THEY WORK. THEY MAKE TRUE DISCIPLES.** You will be hearing more about these practices in coming weeks and months. I think Foss is right. Discipleship is what Jesus asks for. Discipleship is the result of a real, saving relationship with Christ.

What’s so hard about being a Christian? Well, sometimes the teachings are difficult to understand. Sometimes they challenge what we thought we knew about the world, and sometimes they ask us to change the way we live in the world. Then again, sometimes the

teachings are palatable but the fellow Christians are difficult. It's true—we're a pack of sinners and sometimes we do bite at one another. Sometimes we act like cannibals. And then again, sometimes it's hard to be a Christian because there are so many other choices out there which entice us and tempt us and lure us away from the true bread. We grow accustomed to poor imitations and it's hard to break old habits. But it's like the Italian immigrant grandmother said when she saw all the bread on the American supermarket shelves—"Why do people eat-a these things? They have-a no taste!" (Dawn Ottoni Wilhelm, 2009, in *Feasting on the Word* B(3), Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, p. 385) When you've tasted the real thing, the best thing, nothing else will take his place. Jesus is the real thing, the best thing, and being his disciple gives real and eternal life.

Share in his life. Eat his bread, drink his cup, live his life.

Be a true disciple. You won't regret it.