

## *John 6:56-69*

*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. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever." He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum. When many of his disciples heard it, they said, "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?" But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, "Does this offend you? Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. But among you there are some who do not believe." For Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe, and who was the one that would betray him. And he said, "For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father." Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. So Jesus asked the twelve, "Do you also wish to go away?" Simon Peter answered him, "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."*

This week, while out walking our dog, I was approached by a well-intentioned fellow Christian. He asked if I knew the true God, and I confessed that I was an ordained Mennonite minister. Usually this is where my conversations with street evangelists starts to wrap up. When realization sets in that they are talking with someone who has already done a great deal of study and reflection. But this guy was persistent. He asked if I believed that the Bible was the word of God, and then quickly pivoted to questions about our church. Did we happen to meet on Sundays? I quickly responded that we did, and that he would be welcome to join us on Norma Street near the Ramada.

But he wasn't interested in knowing about where our building was located. He had far more pressing matters to talk about - that we had forsaken God by choosing to worship on Sunday, rather than the biblical Saturday. He lamented that we had decided to follow the pagan practice of worshipping on Sundays, ignoring the fourth of the 10 commandments, and urged me to consider the error of my ways. After showing me some verses that backed up his point, I admitted that I wasn't convinced, and that for Sabbath teaching, I didn't think a literal reading of the text was necessary. He told me that we had reached an impasse, and quickly moved on to the next unexpected stranger walking along College Avenue.

I've found myself thinking of this man several times since our meeting. Imagine having such a deep held conviction of Saturday sabbath that you approach strangers - even fellow people of Christian faith - to try and get them to see the error in their ways.

It is a kind of certainty that I wonder if I have in me. It makes me wonder what my core convictions are that would cause me to stop someone on the sidewalk armed with my Bible.

And it makes me think in a different way about today's scripture passage, especially this part - (SLIDE) The one who eats this bread will live forever. This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?" Who can accept it indeed. Is this what true faith looks like? Drawing a line in the sand that we either opt in or move on?

Let's take a look at this particular teaching. If you were able to be a part of one of the Church Around the Table groups last week, you know that our scripture passage last week also referenced the body and blood of Jesus. Passages like these ones are the foundation that the church built its teachings and practice of the Lord's Supper, or Communion. Jesus' words to his disciples evolved into the early church breaking bread and drinking wine whenever they would meet. The refrain, "do this, in remembrance of me" is something that the global church has carried along for more than 2000 years in a variety of traditions and practices.

But communion has changed - sometimes dramatically - through history. This teaching is difficult... let's look at how we've tried to work with it.

We can look back to the origin of this moment we call the Last Supper (SLIDE), Jesus breaking bread and drinking wine around a table with friends. Most scholars believe this was not unlike what the early church practice of communion looked like. (SLIDE) Followers of this Jesus movement gathered around tables in homes rather than temples or churches, breaking bread and sharing in each other's lives. As church structures began to formalize, communion was presided over by church leaders. (SLIDE) This is also when we start to see the crystallization of a theology that said that the bread and wine, when consecrated by the priest, literally become the physical body and blood of Christ. Transubstantiation elevated the elements beyond symbolic foodstuff to something mystical and metaphysical. The elements became sacred. Communion rails were added to sanctuaries to differentiate and separate the sacred from the lowly and earthly congregation. (SLIDE) Communion became reserved only for those who were baptized into the church, and only handed down from those who were in the proper sacred roles. In some traditions the communion elements were given their own protected parts of church building, hidden away in decorative cupboards (SLIDE) away from the hands of anyone but those who had permission to touch them.

At various times during church history, communion was only practiced by the priests, protected from the commoners, with the theory being that the people were not worthy or prepared to receive something so sacred.

The onset of the Reformation began to reclaim communion as a practice for all who believed. (SLIDE) Our early Anabaptist forefathers and mothers longed for a fellowship of all believers, and reclaimed in many places during the birth of that movement to sharing in the Lord's Supper once again around tables in homes, and rejecting the church structures that held on to so much power and control over the people.

Despite our best intentions, and desire for believers to proclaim their own faith before baptism, it didn't take us long as Mennonites to begin to re-establish church structures and hierarchies. Some of us here are old enough to remember the conference bishop visiting homes of the church members, (SLIDE) to make sure that their hearts were ready to participate in annual communion services, and of course to remind subtly, that only those who had professed a faith, been baptized and remained in good standing, were eligible to receive communion.

Our efforts here and in many other churches to make communion more accessible have been to have an open table (SLIDE), grapes and crackers, and gluten free bread, available to all who desire participation in this ancient ritual. I have a memory of someone during one of our attempts to take communion over Zoom during the pandemic admitting that they only had orange juice and toast on hand, so that became their elements.

Whew... This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?" Who can accept it indeed.

So then what? Our scripture text from this morning points out that following Jesus' teachings was too difficult for some, and that many who were part of this new movement decided that they'd rather not continue to follow along. Bethany and I were caught by this verse this week (SLIDE) as we prepared for this service... Jesus asked the twelve, "Do you also wish to go away?" Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.

Communion and baptism were important enough for those church reformers and anabaptists to put their lives on the line for what they believed, despite being at variance with the dominant voices of their time. In fact I chuckled to myself this week when I read that Menno Simons was worried when he started to wonder about the current practice of communion of his time. You see he noticed that when his colleagues began researching what scripture had to say, their minds were changed. Menno was worried

he too would be corrupted by reading what the Bible might say about communion. Looking at what scripture said about that led to him digging deeper into what the Bible had to say about baptism, and before he knew it, he had in fact changed his mind and become part of the Anabaptist movement working to reclaim the true direction of Christ's kingdom.

Menno believed that (SLIDE) "True evangelical faith, cannot lie dormant, it clothes the naked, it feeds the hungry, it comforts the sorrowful, it shelters the destitute, it serves those that harm it, it binds up that which is wounded, it has become all things to all creatures."

What does that mean for us? I think it means we need to continue to reflect on what we hear from scripture, and to lean on each other as we do. But perhaps even more than that we get to look at glimmers of where we see the fullness of life. Does a teaching or belief do these things that Menno highlighted, clothing the naked, feeding the hungry, comforting the sorrowful, sheltering the destitute. It means we think critically on what we believe together, about what it means to be a person of faith and why we believe that, because we can see the signs. It means that like the mothers and fathers who have come before us, we get to work out together what our core convictions are, through prayer and practice, and through watching God at work in the world.

It means we continue to share with each other about who and what has been meaningful in shaping our faith. It means that we share those ah-ha moments when something new crystallizes for us. One of those recent moments for me was learning about the differences between the bread and wine in the ancient middle east while preparing my Church Around the Table reflection. Understanding that bread was considered fuel for the body, but wine was fuel for the spirit will change my understanding of my own communion practice moving forward, and I think has provided me with a new kind of depth and beauty. We also need to notice and share with each other when we have the courage to struggle, doubt, and question, and trust that we will hold each other in the midst of the challenges of our journeys together.

I wish I had the composure to stop and ask that street preacher why holding Saturday as sabbath was so important to him, and what value and depth it added to his faith. Perhaps it would have provided me a moment of empathy in a world so often bent on proving our own personal point, or winning an argument. I wish I had a few more moments for us to see the humanity in each other and find common ground, rather than arguing about which understanding of sabbath was the correct one. This feels so crucial in our politicized cultural moment, especially with a presidential election looming. I can

feel myself dig in my heels because of my own righteous opinions, rather than striving for common ground.

This teaching is difficult; who can accept it? How will we ever know, if we cannot see ourselves in each other, noticing where God's spirit breaks into each of our lives in meaningful ways?

Friends, may we continue this journey of faith, bringing with us our questions, challenges, doubts, and moments where we feel more certain. May we continue to share with each other the people who have shaped our faith, the memories of past mothers and fathers who have provided us with insight and clarity, and celebrate when we see God's kingdom here in our lives.

And may we continue to seek the peace that passes all understanding, despite difficult teachings. May it be so. Amen.