

Twenty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time

August 25, 2024

Well, our five weeks and nearly seventy verses of our journey through the sixth chapter of John's Gospel is coming to an end. It began with the well-known miracle of the loaves and fishes, a story that showed us both Jesus' compassion and his power.

Our journey continued through three weeks of Jesus using some pretty outrageous statements and confusing imagery to describe himself over and over as the Bread of Life, and shocking his disciples by telling them that they needed to eat his flesh and drink his blood or they wouldn't have life within them. And it concludes today with his disciples looking at one another and almost certainly thinking, for lack of a better phrase, "What in the world is Jesus talking about?" And for some of them it had all become simply too much, too puzzling, too strange, too demanding. We are told that, in the end,

“. . . many of his disciples returned to their former way of life and no longer accompanied him.”

How could that happen? Hadn't they heard the enlightening parables he told? Hadn't they seen his incredible power over nature? Hadn't they seen him heal others in a miraculous way? Hadn't they heard all the wise things he said time and time again? How could they leave him? I guess you and me would never have done that!

But are we so sure? One could argue that, not only would we have done the same thing two thousand years ago, but we are actually doing the same thing right now - in this time and place. Of course, we often don't believe we have walked away from Jesus, we don't believe we fail to accompany him, we don't believe we don't really accept his teachings, we don't believe we continually "return to our former way of life". Rather, we sometimes fool ourselves into believing that our presence here week after week assures us that we are still buying what Jesus is selling.

But aren't we returning to our former way of life every time we

. Yell at our spouse, apologize and say we'll do better, and yell at him or her again a half hour later?

. Sit in these pews and promise to forgive someone who has wronged us, yet wake up tomorrow carrying the same grudge?

. Hear Jesus challenge us to give from our want and not from our excess, but someone keep coming up with excuses for clinging to every dollar?

. Say to ourselves, or to others, or to God, or to a priest in the confessional, that we sincerely want to stop all the bad stuff; stop gossiping, or putting people down, or being impatient, or judging people unfairly, or stealing things from work, or cheating on our taxes, or cheating on our spouses, but somehow don't make it a day before falling into the same pattern of behavior? (Honestly, sometimes we don't even make it out of the parking lot, or in my case, back to the rectory before embracing the same old faults, the same old pettiness, the same old me.)

Yes, every time we wake up the exact same person we were the day before we are, in a sense, returning to our old selves, no longer accompanying Jesus who wants nothing more than for us to embrace a new way of seeing, a new way of acting, a new way of being. You see "serving the Lord" as we heard Joshua and his household pledge to do in the First Reading, is not just "believing" the right things. That's the easy part. It's also "doing" the right things, embracing the new life promised to us and made possible by the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. And yes, it is not easy. We know that. And there is a temptation to echo the words of some of the disciples who struggled with what they had been hearing from the mouth of Jesus.

"This saying is hard; who can accept it?"

Love your enemies. Go the extra mile. Give your extra cloak away. Turn the other cheek. Forgive seventy times seven times. Yes, what Jesus asks of us is difficult. Really difficult. But we don't have to do it alone. Jesus will always accompany us, Jesus will strengthen us, pick us up, and most importantly if we are open to him, transform us into the beautiful people he created us to be, the kind of people who are able to say with all honesty,

“Master, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.”

So my dear friends in Christ, let's truly take to heart what we have heard over these past five weeks, words from the mouth of Jesus encouraging us to believe in the miracle that takes place at this holy table. But more than that, let's make sure we also believe and trust in and are open to what this meal is meant to bring about. And what is that?

We are to become whom we eat. And for most of us, maybe all of us, that sure wasn't the person we were yesterday. So, let's never return to our former way of life, but rather, wake up each day a little closer to being the man or woman Jesus wants us to be, in other words, the best versions of ourselves.