

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost
August 26, 2018
Christ the Rock Evangelical Lutheran Church
Farmington, New Mexico

John 6:60-69 On hearing it, many of his disciples said, "This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?"

61 Aware that his disciples were grumbling about this, Jesus said to them, "Does this offend you? **62** Then what if you see the Son of Man ascend to where he was before! **63** The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you—they are full of the Spirit and life. **64** Yet there are some of you who do not believe." For Jesus had known from the beginning which of them did not believe and who would betray him. **65** He went on to say, "This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless the Father has enabled them."

66 From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him.

67 "You do not want to leave too, do you?" Jesus asked the Twelve.

68 Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.

69 We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God."

"True Words for True Life"

There are two types of people in this world. People who wake up when the alarm goes off and people who hit the snooze. People who drive automatic and who say driving anything other than stick shift is cheating. Android and Apple. People who have all their apps on their screen and people who put all their apps in folders. People who have to have all the notifications cleared and people who have 1,582 emails waiting for them. And there's my personal favorite. There are two types of people in this world. Those who divide people into two groups of people and those who don't.

In a sense, Jesus does divide people into two different groups - those who believe in him and those who don't. But the distinction between the two might be different than you think. After miraculously feeding 5,000 people with 2 fish and 5 loaves of bread, Jesus teaches crowds in the local synagogue at Capernaum. When he's done, a smaller crowd follows him out into the street where he gets a puzzled reaction from many of his hearers. A significant number of them just can't get over the challenging teaching Jesus presents. Jesus probes further with some penetrating questions. There are two different kinds of responses. Two different reactions. Some are offended and leave. Others believe and stay. Jesus uses this encounter to teach true discipleship. Disciples hold onto the words of Jesus. Disciples receive true life staying with Jesus and his words. Jesus brings disciples closer to him to realize he gives true words for true life.

Since there is a difference between believing in Jesus and not believe, we have to ask: What is faith? How do we define belief? Those are really personal questions. And you are probably going to get very different answers depending on whom you ask. Here is one view: "religion to me has always seemed strange because although it is about praying to and believing God,

there are a lot of forced upon ideas.”¹ That same author goes on to define belief as trusting in the universe, taking something you want to happen and having faith that it will happen, realizing we might just need positive hope to make the best possible outcomes actually take place, a way of motivating ourselves to a better place. The author uses the example of agnostic actor Anthony Hopkins using belief to overcome alcoholism. Sounds a lot better than a religion that gives you a predetermined community that tells you what to believe and how to act if you want to stay inside that community.

Now, the important thing is this is one person’s opinions on faith. This is how he feels the universe works. This is how he sees the world. But I don’t think he’s very far off from the way a lot of people treat faith. To me that sounds a lot like the reaction of so many people walking out of the synagogue in Capernaum with Jesus: **“This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?”** (John 6:60) In fact, Jesus had been throwing some pretty challenging teachings at them. He told them he is the Bread of Life. He came down from heaven. You must take him and absorb him in an intimate and fully committed way like eating his flesh and drinking his blood. He gives his flesh for the life of the world. And Jesus had been formulating it in the sense of ultimatums. If you do this, then you have life. Unless you do it, you will miss out on it.

So it’s not hard to sympathize with those perplexed crowds who are challenged by the difficult teachings of Jesus. It’s pretty natural for us to wonder if this is what we really want. Those concepts of religious faith and belief in the universe might be something we formally adopt as our creed, but they influence us just like the air we breath has an impact on us. As one Christian author put it: “Sometimes when we think we’re following Jesus the most, we’re actually attaching our own hopes of political power, self-improvement, or any other sense of ‘being in the right.’”² In other words, we project our own hopes onto Jesus regardless of what he is trying to give us. We want Jesus to deliver us from loneliness. We want Jesus to breath new life into a loveless marriage. We want Jesus to provide an exit from a dead-end job. In a functional sense, we have a view of faith more like that positive vibes from the universe than what Jesus outlines here.

The problem is, Jesus don’t flinch or bend. He insists on the truth of his words: **“The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you—they are full of the Spirit and life.”** (John 6:63) When Jesus points us to his true words for true life, the reaction is predictable: **“From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him.”** (John 6:66) When we project our expectations on Jesus and then he fails to live up to them, we fall into disillusionment of discipleship. When life with Jesus feels worse than life without Jesus, we want to walk away. When a loved one is robbed of health, when family members get into a terrible car crash, when marriages fall apart, when we fail to get into the school or land the job, when our belief that we’ve done the right

¹ Ethan Greavu. “The Main Difference between Religion and Belief.” The Startup. Accessed at: <https://medium.com/swlh/the-main-difference-between-religion-and-belief-4867f979260d> on 17 August 2018.

² Will McDavid, The Mockingbird Devotional, p. 289,290 (August 23)

things for God and then that sense of security comes crashing down, our natural impulse is to leave and no longer follow Jesus.

For that reason, Jesus challenges each us no matter who we are, young or old, and now matter what level of faith we see in ourselves - first time to church, never opened Bible before in our lives or having read through the Bible cover to cover 6 times and never missed a Sunday since that time you had the chicken pox when you were 6 years old, Jesus challenges us to evaluate and reconsider our own ideas of what it means to believe in him. And Jesus does that, not to humiliate us or to play spiritual gotcha, but to deepen our relationship with him and pour out his intended blessings into our lives. His true words give true life.

Over the summer my family has had the chance to do a little traveling. As we pass through the area, I can't help but think of how challenging it was for our grandparents and especially their grandparents just to get around without all the modern conveniences we have. You can almost imagine what it must have been like to get through the mountains or get across the desert 100 years ago or even 200 years ago or more. You need someone who can give you trustworthy guidance to get you where you need to go. You need something more than empty promises of protection and worthless treaties to ensure exemption from hostilities.

Compare that with a belief that is equivalent to trusting in the universe. Hope for a bright future and a positive outlook for challenging situations won't help you much when you are stranded in the desert without food, water or any friends to render assistance. Your belief that everything will align just right can be hugely motivating. It can motivate you to speed off toward the sunset at top speed straight into a death trap. Trekking across a treacherous and unforgiving landscape means you need more than positive vibes sent out into the universe.

Jesus wants you to have more than wishful thinking. He wants you to believe in more than just that God is real. Jesus wants you to have a better conviction than a higher power is watching over you. Jesus asks his closest 12 followers: **"You do not want to leave too, do you?"** (John 6:67) Jesus isn't asking the 12 apostles whether they are going to stay to help assure his fragile ego. Jesus is trying to teach disciples the true nature of discipleship. He wants to help establish them solidly in the faith. That means opening their eyes to see the truth of who he is and what he does. Jesus wants to be the One you trust in. Jesus wants to offer the words that give you confidence. Jesus has true words for true life.

That's why Jesus doesn't shy away from harsh words that offend our sensibilities. Jesus is the one who does what is hardest of all. Jesus lives a life without any slip ups or even minor imperfections. Jesus then absorbs all the truly offensive words raining down on him from Jerusalem's rabble and most respected religious leaders. Jesus absorbs in his body all the offensively harsh treatment by Roman soldiers. Jesus doesn't want to trap anyone by his teachings. Jesus wants to be the one to spring you lose from the trap set by all of life's false hopes and unattainable expectations. Jesus wants to give you real freedom for a real life. To do that he had to be the Holy one of God. He had to get through his earthly existence

without a scratch of impurity or taint of falling into temptation. God's Holy one had to offer his faultless life for sinners so thoroughly contaminated by sin we can't see our own flawed image of ourselves.

Jesus wants to take you deeper than your expectations to give you his true words. We can echo the words of Peter: **"Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God."** (John 6:68,69) We receive Jesus' words in confidence. We trust those words are true because they lead us to see Jesus as the Savior we need even if he's not the rescuer we want. By the Holy Spirit's work we have come to recognize Jesus' life and teaching are the solution every soul needs, no matter what we are looking for.

A week ago when Aretha Franklin died, there were all sorts of tributes pouring in. Yet, it was interesting to learn that her father, an influential pastor said no matter how successful she became as a pop singer, she always thought of herself first as a gospel singer. Maybe that isn't too shocking when you consider her life story. It wasn't easy. Her mother wasn't a big presence in her life. Her father was a celebrated pastor and was often absent. "She had two children at a young age, both out of wedlock, and suffered through a series of bad marriages and abusive relationships."³ Her first recordings didn't find big audiences. As her career suffered, so did her health. So maybe it is only fitting that as the tributes come pouring in, she is being remembered for the emotional gospel songs song for presidents and civil rights leaders. It is actually because her life didn't always match her expectations, because she had been "in the storm too long" that she found her refuge in the words of Jesus.

The words from Jesus may challenge us, but they can be our treasure. When the universe lets us down, when our lives don't go the way we plan, when our positive vibes to the universe aren't returned back to us, Jesus is still there with words guiding us to eternal life. His words get us over disillusionment of discipleship. Jesus builds knowledge in our hearts through his word. Jesus increases our dedication toward him. The true words of Jesus keep us focused of life beyond our earthbound definitions of success. The true words of Jesus make a huge difference for life right now. You have confidence you are a blood-bought child of God no matter how your plans turn out. The words of Jesus give you conviction that the one who secured your rescue from hell is with you through the most hellish moments of this life. Jesus gives his true words so you have true life. Amen.

³ Robert F Darden. "Aretha Franklin's One Faith," Christianity Today, 16 August 2018. Accessed: <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2018/august-web-only/aretha-franklin-died-tribute.html> on 20 August 2018.