

## **Sermon: “Easier Said Than Done”**

**August 23, 2015**

**Pastor Sally May**

**Scripture: John 6:56-69 (NRSV)**

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<sup>56</sup>Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. <sup>57</sup>Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me.

<sup>58</sup>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.” <sup>59</sup>He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum.

<sup>60</sup>When many of his disciples heard it, they said, “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?”

<sup>61</sup>But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, “Does this offend you? <sup>62</sup>Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before?”

<sup>63</sup>It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. <sup>64</sup>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. <sup>65</sup>And he said, “For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father.” <sup>66</sup>Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him.

<sup>67</sup>So Jesus asked the twelve, “Do you also wish to go away?” <sup>68</sup>Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. <sup>69</sup>We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.” -

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## **“Easier Said Than Done”**

**Pastor Sally May**

Before I speak specifically to today’s scripture reading, I think it is important to consider it within the context of all of Chapter 6 of the Gospel of John. The “bread of life” weekly readings and reflections/sermons we embarked on in July, were from Chapter 6, and it began with what we identify as two miracles; one is with Jesus among a crowd and the feeding of @ 5000 people with loaves and fishes, and the other witnessed by the disciples – terrified, I might add – as Jesus walked on the sea towards them in their boat.

The following week (verses 24-35) we heard that the crowd followed Jesus across the sea to Capernaum, asking him “What must we do to perform the works of God?” “What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing?”

This is the first time Jesus says “I am the bread of life.”

What's interesting is the following text (verses 35-51) makes no mention of a crowd. The audience now is "the Jews." Where have all the people gone?

And then last week's scripture reading was about the eating of flesh and drinking of blood. Remember? And again, this is with the faithful – Jesus's fellow Jews. And they, like the crowd, question what Jesus is saying about who he is, what he is about, his faith, his relationship with God. And they are arguing amongst themselves. The Jews disputed among themselves, saying, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?"

And now today, the "crowd" is even fewer: "He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum." (vs 59) Jesus is talking with the disciples – specifically his students and followers. And *they* are struggling with what Jesus is try to tell them, to teach them, to have them believe. Verse 60, "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?" When Jesus responded (vs 63) "It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life." He also acknowledges that there are those who not only don't understand, but don't believe." The response by the people, the many followers and students, the disciples, was not to stay to try to understand what Jesus meant, or to seek to believe, but rather as verse 66 tells us, "many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him." And the crowd was even smaller, down to the original 12 disciples.

I believe if the author of John is trying to tell us anything in this section of the Gospel, it is that faith in Jesus is not easy. And it is not always safe. The first verse of Chapter 7 it is written: "After this Jesus went about in Galilee. He did not wish to go about in Judea because the Jews were looking for an opportunity to kill him." As an aside, I am not sure "wish" would be an apt description. Other ancient texts use the words "not at liberty."<sup>1</sup> Either way, Jesus knew his life was in jeopardy.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John+7> (accessed 8/21/15)

It is important to remember that Jesus was a Jew. He was not attempting to start a new religion. His goal was to offer new meaning and interpretation of Torah; Jewish teachings and of Jewish law. Jesus was striving to teach and help people understand these teachings in ways that would affect how they live and how they care for one another. In the Gospel of Matthew we read Jesus saying – “You have heard.... But I say to you,” repeatedly. When he is asked which commandment is the first of all the commandments, Jesus doesn’t say one of the Ten Commandments, rather he says, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. The second is this, you shall love your neighbor as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these.” Now, the listeners to this would recognize the first commandment Jesus offers as it is written in the Torah in the book of Deuteronomy (6:5). Many quotes attributed to Jesus include reference to the Hebrew Scriptures. Jesus is not saying something the crowds, the Jewish people have not already heard. But he is offering new ways of hearing, new ways of understanding, and thus new ways of responding to these texts. In all of it he was offering the hearers and seers of his teachings what it means and what it looks like to be in relationship with God.

And according to today’s text, it made many people very uncomfortable. So uncomfortable, that they turned away.

Very powerful to me are the words attributed to Jesus in today’s text. “It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.” (vs 63) This is a new teaching.<sup>2</sup> Jesus is connecting the need for spirit in order to have life, real life. That it is not his body, his physical presence that is most important. It is his spirit, the spirit in which he lives, and breathes and has his being. And it is a spirit born in God and of God. Jesus is asking, nay, telling his followers to see with different eyes, to hear with different ears, to understand not with their minds, but with their hearts.

As we all know, this can be difficult to do; sometimes seemingly impossible. We spend so much of our lives on the practical and we believe that what we see or hear or think is real or the

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<sup>2</sup> The New Interpreter’s Bible, Volume IX, O’Day, Gail R. Gospel of John, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995. p 610.

only way to see or hear or think. We often react rather than respond. We are often like the crowds who sought Jesus out after they were physically hungry and wanted more bread and fish, or like the Jews who turn away from the fullness of who Jesus was and is and taught when we shortsightedly hear or read his teachings in a literal way. Much harm is done when we forget the spirit in life. Thanks to Lucy Samara who shared a video on Facebook with a reading written and spoken by Brother David Steindl-Rast, a Benedictine monk. I offer to you his words that I found to be a beautiful, insightful, and honest reminder to all of us of what a gift life is, the best gifts in our lives, and the gift of the presence of the spirit; all of which we too often do not recognize, dismiss, neglect, or acknowledge.

### **A Good Day**

You think this is just another day in your life. It's not just another day; it's the one day that is given to you today. It's given to you. It's a gift. It's the only gift that you have right now, and the only appropriate response is gratefulness. If you do nothing else but to cultivate that response to the great gift that this unique day is, if you learn to respond as if it were the first day of your life, and the very last day, then you will have spent this day very well.

Begin by opening your eyes and be surprised that you have eyes you can open, that incredible array of colors that is constantly offered to us for pure enjoyment. Look at the sky. We so rarely look at the sky. We so rarely note how different it is from moment to moment with clouds coming and going. We just think of the weather, and even of the weather we don't think of all the many nuances of weather. We just think of good weather and bad weather. This day right now has unique weather, maybe a kind that will never exactly in that form come again. The formation of clouds in the sky will never be the same that it is right now. Open your eyes. Look at that.

Look at the faces of people that you meet. Each one has an incredible story behind their face, a story that you could never fully fathom, not only their own story, but the story of their ancestors. We all go back so far. And in this present moment on this day all the people you meet, all that life from generations and from so many places all over the world, flows together and meets you here like a life-giving water, if you only open your heart and drink.

Open your heart to the incredible gifts that civilization gives to us. You flip a switch and there is electric light. You turn a faucet and there is warm water and cold water – and drinkable water. It's a gift that millions and millions in the world will never experience.

So these are just a few of an enormous number of gifts to which you can open your heart. And so I [and so do I] wish for you that you would open your heart to all these blessings and let them flow through you, that everyone whom you will meet on this day will be blessed by you; just by your eyes, by your smile, by your touch – just by your presence. Let the gratefulness overflow into blessing all around you, and then it will really be a good day.

(Brother David Steindl-Rast)

Is that not beautiful – Is that not what we want, how we want to be, how we should be. However, we must own our truth, our reality and that is that that for most of us all of this – seeing and hearing with our hearts more than our intellect, recognizing that every day, every encounter, every experience is a gift, doing what Jesus asks us, tells us to do, how to be relationship with one another – to love – is much easier said than done.

Yet, there is hope. For you, for me, for this community, this nation, our world. And that hope is rooted in our faith in the grace and mercy and love of God, and God’s faith in us.

Scripture reveals a God who, no matter what, stays with us responding with a purpose of reconciliation and continued relationship.

In the Adam and Eve story, they may have had to move from the Garden after eating forbidden fruit, but God doesn’t abandon them. The Bible does not say that God stayed in the garden while he banished them from Eden. God continues to be with them, and with Cain. And our John texts reference the Israelites in the wilderness from the book of Exodus <sup>49</sup>“Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died.” Scripture describes men and women in the wilderness, moaning and groaning and complaining that God is not with them – and yet they always have enough to eat, and they are led by the prophet Moses to the Promised Land. God’s continued presence and love for creation is visible in the rainbow. And then there is the story and life of Jesus. God is at the cross... humanity abandoned Jesus and allowed him to be tortured and crucified – yet Jesus knows God is present as he cries – “Into your hands I commend my spirit.” God does not leave us – and God does not give up on us.... The disciples locked away in a room grief stricken and terrified saw Jesus. In their visions they were offered hope and they were given strength and courage to carry on what Jesus had begun.

Like our ancestors 2000 years ago, many of us find it difficult or frightening to hear and understand what Jesus is teaching and asking us, calling us to do and be. Still, as that may be, let us not give up or turn away. Today's text, Chapter 6 of the Gospel of John, Christian Scriptures, Hebrew Scriptures, the Bible whole tells me, tell us – that it is in God we should trust.

Let us be led in spirit, and by the Holy Spirit, trusting, believing that God is with us. Let us see and hear and know in our hearts, in our souls, in our very being that God has faith in us. With that knowledge may we have the strength and the courage and the vision and the love to carry on what Jesus started.