

Reading from the Gospel: John 6:56-69

Hard Stuff to Believe

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E. Stanley Jones tells of a missionary who got lost in an African jungle, nothing around him but bush and a few cleared places. He found a native hut and asked the native if he could get him out. The native said he could.

“All right,” said the missionary, “show me the way.” The native said, “Walk,” so they walked and hacked their way through unmarked jungle for more than an hour. The missionary got worried. “Are you quite sure this is the way? Where is the path?”

The native said, “Bwana, in this place there is no path. I am the path.”

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I'm sure that missionary was hoping that the native would follow a path already cut through the jungle. Charting your own course through unknown territory is not something most of us want to do. And when you do ... you probably carry a lot of fear and anxiety along with you as excess baggage ... you never know what's going to happen ... or what you're going to face in the jungle.

And yet ... sometimes there is no other way ... but to forge ahead into the great unknown ... I believe the same can be said of the church today ... particularly for us Presbyterians ... who seem to be stumbling around in circles looking for a path through of the jungle of despair.

After all ... as a denomination ... we're shrinking ... our numbers continue to drop. And for some reason, we just can't find the path we're looking for ... a path that will lead us to a new place where we, will once again ... become the church on the shining hill.

But there seems to be only jungle around us ... a jungle that seems to be encircling us tighter and tighter as we seem to become smaller and smaller. The fact is ... when you add up all the people who joined the Presbyterian Church USA last year and compare it to those who either died or left the church during the same year ... the net result is 69,381 fewer members. Not very encouraging.

But I want to tell you something. Regardless of that dismal statistic ... regardless of all the church doomsayers ... I have never been more filled with hope ... more energized by the Holy Spirit ... more excited about where our shared ministry is heading ... more so now than I've ever been in the nine years I've served as your pastor here at Columbia. Because this particular church isn't afraid of heading into the jungle.

You want to know why? Because the one we trust to follow is “the path” ... Jesus Christ. Following Christ isn't going to be a fun ride at Six Flags ... it is the hardest thing we can do in our lives ... but it is the right path.

Listen now to some hard words to swallow from our Savior in the gospel of John, chapter 6,

verses 56-69. See if you want to follow, too.

56 "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.

57 Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me.

58 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."

59 He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum.

60 When many of his disciples heard it, they said, "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?"

61 But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, "Does this offend you?"

62 Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before?"

63 It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.

64 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.

65 And he said, "For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father."

66 Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him.

67 So Jesus asked the twelve, "Do you also wish to go away?"

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

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

This is the word of our Lord. **Thanks be to God!**

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in Thy Sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

Those are some hard words to swallow. I suspect that up to this point, this might have been the hardest day of Jesus Christ's ministry. Just a little while back in the story, he fed thousands on the hillside with just a small basket of bread and fish.

Many people now want to join this wonderful rabbi walking the countryside and performing

wonderful miracles and healings ... many want to be his disciple. But then Jesus tells them some hard words about what it means to truly commit your life to him ... words some of them don't understand ... words that many are afraid of ... words that scare many of them away. I suspect I would have run from him, too.

Yes ... words like eating flesh and drinking blood may seem weird to some of these wanna-be disciples. But I don't think that's what worries them so much. If you are really listening to him, you know he isn't talking about cannibalism.

What Christ is trying to get them to understand is this: if you're going to follow me ... to follow me completely ... than I will be in you and you in me. In other words ... no matter where you go in this world ... not matter what you do ... no matter what you say ... a committed Christian disciple is filled with the grace and love of Christ ... and it will be apparent in every thought, word or deed.

Both body and spirit are brought together into a mystical union in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. There is wholeness ... a complete relationship in Jesus Christ that touches every facet of our lives and in our living. Yet look what happens. Many of these wanna-be disciples just walk away. Because it seems just too hard ... too hard to follow Jesus or his path.

Think about it ... what would we say about Jesus in this day and age. Well first of all, we'd probably say that he is a Presbyterian pastor. After all ... look at what happens. He goes from thousands of followers and many disciples ... and he's left with just 12. Looks like he's pastoring a shrinking church to me.

Jesus would probably feel right at home in a Presbyterian pulpit. We'd probably say that he is a failure by today's standards. After all ... do you really think he would be called to pastor a church if he told the nominating committee that he was pretty sure that most of the people would leave after hearing him preach? I don't think so. That's because we're all about numbers. The bigger the better. Success is measured by numbers.

And the declining numbers Christ is responsible for there in Galilee ... well, I wouldn't call that much of a success. We'd call him a failure. Except ... he didn't fail. How did he succeed in what he did in his ministry amongst us?

Well, first of all, it really isn't about the numbers. There is no doubt that the gentle Savior would have done anything to bring a lost sinner home ... to even die on the cross. But his message never changed or wavered. He didn't put a spin on his words to attract disciples ... he spoke to their hearts ... and called them.

Unfortunately, we don't do that very well in the church today. Because we're caught up in the numbers game. Sometimes growing the church in this world is like operating a used car lot. You don't sell many cars by being completely honest, do you? Ya gotta let the customer think he or she is getting the deal of their life ... you don't sell cars by reminding potential buyers that they'll have to change the oil on a regular basis and that tune ups are necessary and costly and that tires will have to be replaced and parts are going to wear out.

No ... you don't focus on those things ... you don't present the complete picture. It's better to paint a picture of the customer out there on the open road enjoying the freedom of driving that car across the country.

And so it is in the church ... we don't always tell the whole story to someone who wants to know more about Jesus Christ. We don't want to scare someone away by telling them that being a disciple of Jesus Christ is one of the hardest ... scariest ... difficult ... and one of the most dirty jobs they'll ever attempt. That's not how to sell someone on your church.

No ... we tell them about the potlucks ... and the great get-togethers ... and the wonderful loving community ... and all the other fun activities associated with Advent and Christmas and Easter and youth activities at Six Flags. Oh ... did I mention you might have to model your life after Christ ... don't worry ... that's easy. He was just a gentle Savior who had a smile on his face for everyone and a kind word for all the children. Jesus is my buddy.

And don't worry ... you do something wrong and he'll forgive you in a heartbeat ... join this church and you're sure to get a ticket to the eternal banquet in the sky ... don't worry about that other place ... we don't talk much about that here. Well guess what? That doesn't work.

That kind of Christianity is tantamount to hypocrisy. And it's certainly not about true Christian discipleship. And I believe that is one of the greatest reasons for the decline of mainline denominations today. We're not honest.

We'd rather maintain the church institution than truly make disciples of Jesus Christ. And you know what scares us ... as pastors ... as elders ... as members ... that if we are truthful ... if we share what it truly means to be a disciple ... people will walk away. Yeah ... that's true.

People will just get up and walk away. It happened to Christ. It will happen to us. But friends ... it's not about numbers ... it's about true discipleship ... it's about living lives in a new and different way ... incarnate with Jesus Christ ... wrapped up entirely into a holy relationship ... in which the very fabric of Christ is woven into our souls ... our spirits.

So what do you suppose that really looks like ... you know ... if we're going to be honest. What would that kind of church look like? Well ... maybe something like this ... it is a church that hears the word of God ... all the words.

Some of those words are hard on the ear ... some of them challenge us to the very core of our beings ... yet we are still willing to hear them ... to share them ... to struggle together over them to discern their meaning for our lives and for the lives of those we serve in this world.

It is a church that worships the Living God with the full breadth of all it has to give ... a church that relishes authentic worship from its soul ... a church that's willing to worship in ways that speak to all who come into this place ... a church willing to lift a song in an ancient tempo or to the beat of new melodies.

It is a church in which the members roll up their sleeves and get down and dirty with Jesus Christ in those places that we'd rather not go to ... it is a church that reaches out to the forgotten ... the blind ... the lame ... it reaches out to sinners both within and outside of this building ... it is a church that's not afraid to cross economic boundaries ... racial boundaries ... social boundaries ... ethnic and cultural boundaries ... because it is a church that knows Christ is found everywhere and not just in our little corner of the world. . . it is a church that welcomes the alien, drug addicts, unclean folks, "Goth kids" and those people who don't look like me ... or love like me ... or wear strange clothes or eat funny food ...

It is a church that is concerned when some families have access to health services and some do not ... a church that stands firmly on the principle that everyone should have a place to lay their heads at night ... it is a church that welcomes the little children and stands for their rights when they are abused it is a church that embraces friends and enemies alike in the name of Jesus Christ ... it is a church that forgives one another ... not just strangers but even those other folks who've been sitting next to us on the pew for many years ...

It is a church that doesn't focus so much on planning programs as it does in creating space for spiritual growth ... and most importantly ... it is a church that welcomes people to this table ... to receive the Bread of Life ... knowing that at this table ... everyone stands equal in the site of God ...

It is a church that will nurture the youngest ... just like little Brendon ... who will be baptized in a few moments in the love and grace of Jesus Christ as we commit to share in the journey of his life ... and it is a church that will be there with our oldest ... like Bernie Granger ... whose memories and love of Christ in this holy place continue to sustain her.

So where is that path for such a church? Where is such a path for this church? How do we get through the briars and bushes and the thorny vines of the jungle to reach the place God is calling it to go ... well ... quite simply ... by following Jesus Christ ... the true path. By trusting ... by seeking God's will through prayer and worship ... through service and mission ... through loving relationships ... through acts of forgiveness and confession. And by letting go of our fears about what it means to be successful ... and to focus on building spiritual relationships through Christ with every member and every one who walks through these doors.

We do it by recognizing that this church ... though smaller than it used to be ... is still a vibrant and visible presence of our Savior in this neighborhood ... and will be ... for years to come. As for me ... I'm excited about where we're going. I hope you are too.

Let us pray:

Lord, I want to be like Jesus, in-a-my heart, in-a-my heart.

Lord, I want to be like Jesus in-a my heart.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.