

Pastor Mark R Jacobson † Pentecost 14 Sermon † August 29, 2021

⁶⁰When they heard it, many of his disciples said, “This is a hard teaching! Who can listen to it?” ⁶¹But Jesus, knowing in himself that his disciples were grumbling about this, asked them, “Does this cause you to stumble in your faith? ⁶²What if you would see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? ⁶³The Spirit is the one who gives life. The flesh does not help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life. ⁶⁴But there are some of you who do not believe.” For Jesus knew from the beginning those who would not believe and the one who would betray him. ⁶⁵He said, “This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is given to him by my Father.” ⁶⁶After this, many of his disciples turned back and were not walking with him anymore. ⁶⁷So Jesus asked the Twelve, “You do not want to leave too, do you?” ⁶⁸Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom will we go? You have the words of eternal life. ⁶⁹We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.” – John 6:60-69

If all the disciples jumped off the faith, would you?

Did you or do you have a parent or grandparent who said that to you, “If all your friends jumped off a bridge, would you?” The scenario is you are at the dinner table and your friend is sticking green beans in her ears. You don’t know why she would do that, but she does. And at first you think it’s weird, but then you think it’s awesome, and you decide to stick green beans in your ears, too. But father sees you and asks, “Why on earth would you stick green beans in your ears?” And you answer, “I don’t know, but she did it, too.” And that’s when father says, “If your friend jumped off a bridge, would you?” Jumping off a bridge, like sticking green beans in your ears, is a poor decision. It doesn’t matter if everyone else is doing it or not. Even worse than jumping off a bridge is a disciple who decides to jump off the faith. That is the great tragedy in our Gospel lesson today and playing off Jesus’ words to the Twelve I ask you, “If all the disciples jumped off the faith, would you?”

During the Sundays of August, all our Gospel lessons have come from the Gospel of John, chapter six. That’s five Sundays. And if I were to ask you how much time had elapsed from the beginning of chapter 6 with the miraculous feeding of the 5,000 men to the end of chapter 6 with this little conversation between Jesus and Peter, what would your answer be? Your answer should be – one day.

It was only yesterday when Jesus taught and miraculously fed thousands of people, but now just a day later, the conversation ends with Jesus and Peter and not many more people than we have in this sanctuary, possibly less. What happened? A few things had happened. 1) Some people simply went home. 2) Another group of people came to Jesus and wanted Jesus to make more bread. They argued that Moses made the sky rain bread forty years, and Jesus should do the same. And when Jesus made it clear he wasn’t going to be their “on demand” miracle worker, this group lost interest in Jesus and left. 3) A third group is labeled in our lesson as “disciples.” “Disciples” is a good label to have, followers of Jesus. Sure, they enjoyed the miracles, but they also enjoyed the teaching. They enjoyed the teaching until they learned of a teaching they didn’t enjoy. They called it “a hard teaching.”

Thomas Jefferson, the third President of the United States of America, is known to have had his own Bible. At face value, it’s good to have your own Bible, but the Jefferson Bible is different from the Bible you have. Jefferson accepted the morals of the Bible, the teachings that emphasize positive attitude and good behaviors, but Jefferson subtracted the supernatural aspects of the Bible. Jefferson didn’t believe Jesus performed miracles. He didn’t believe in the presence of angels or even the Resurrection. The Jefferson Bible ends with Jesus being buried.

How many present-day disciples do you know who have jumped off the faith? Sometimes it can be hard to tell who is still following Jesus and who isn’t. Notice the disciples in our lesson did not go to Jesus to talk about the hard teaching with Jesus. No! They grumbled about it amongst themselves. The same is true today. Today we have Super Saturday classes and Catechism classes to teach the faith and bring people into the church through a public confession. We even take a picture of them with the pastors and serve cake. But we don’t have classes designed for people who want to leave the church to talk about what they find to be a hard teaching before leaving. And if we did, they wouldn’t come. There is no public statement of unbelief. No sad picture is taken. No sour grapes served. Disciples of today who are dissatisfied with the teaching of Jesus like the disciples of our lesson, generally, grumble amongst themselves and simply walk away.

I wonder how all these disciples leaving affected the twelve Apostles. The day before they are trying to figure out how to feed thousands of people and now a day later, just about everybody has left. Were they shocked? Surprised? Nothing surprises Jesus. Jesus knows all things. The Bible says, "*Jesus knew from the beginning those who would not believe and the one who would betray him.*" Jesus knows who will stay, and Jesus knows who will go, and yet, Jesus still asks the Twelve, "*You do not want to leave, too, do you?*" Jesus knows this answer, but Jesus asks the question for the benefit of the Twelve and any other remaining disciples. With practically everybody is leaving, it would be easy to wonder, "Why am I staying?" Would the disciples jump off the faith and what appeared outwardly to be a failing cause, or would they continue to believe and follow Jesus?

The answer of Simon Peter, "Lord, to whom will we go? You have the words of eternal life," had nothing to do with Simon Peter. Jesus taught, "*The flesh does not help at all.*" Jesus also taught, "*The Spirit is the one who gives life,*" and "*...no one comes to me unless it is given to him by my Father.*" Yes, Peter believed, but the reason Peter believed is because the Holy Spirit had worked faith in his heart. Only the power of the Holy Spirit could overcome Peter's self-righteousness and convince him of his lost condition. Only the power of the Holy Spirit could bring Peter to see Jesus as the one who is responsible for his eternal life.

The same is true for us who gather around Jesus in his Word and Sacraments. Given a choice, our flesh would most certainly follow the crowd in believing whatever our flesh wishes to be true. Given a choice, every one of us walks further and further away from Jesus. Given a choice, yes, every one of us jumps off the faith, but God the Holy Spirit has given us life. Through the drawing power of God's Word and Sacraments our faith follows Jesus to the cross to repent of our sins. Through the drawing power of God's Word and Sacraments, our faith follows Jesus as we seek to keep his commandments. Through the drawing power of God's Word and Sacraments, our faith follows Jesus today and every day on earth and in heaven for all eternity.

The word of God is powerful, but the love of God is even more amazing. If I knew the people who would end up following Jesus and the people who would end up leaving Jesus, I think I would devote all of my time and all of my energy to the people I know will follow Jesus. That would make sense to me and I think that makes sense to you, too, but look at the love of Jesus. Jesus devotes his time and energy to all people, even the people he already knows won't believe him and will betray him. Jesus, truly, does want all people to be saved. Jesus, truly, does want all people to come to the truth.

And we are his disciples. We, as Christ's followers, certainly don't want to jump off the faith, but don't we, as Christ's followers, want to do all we can to draw people to Jesus? Now, we can't do anything to draw people to Christ, but God's Word can. And when God's Word is seen in our lives and heard from our lips, God can use us as his tools to bring people the truth and salvation.

Right now, at Grace, we have a "God's People Gather" campaign going on. The effort is to get our members back in church for worship and back in Bible class. It's time. Get the vaccine or don't. Wear a mask or don't. Keep your distance or don't. Gather or gather (there is no "don't" in that statement!). Gather in the sanctuary for worship or in the fellowship hall or classrooms for Bible study. And if feel you must, log in online, but then gather for our smaller midweek Bible classes and schedule private communions with your Pastors or your Board of Elders. Don't walk away and stay away. Also, invite and encourage. Our Board of Elders are making phone calls, and these phone calls are being positively received. Some of our members have been gone so long from worship and Bible study, they feel weird coming back. If that's the case, September 12 and September 19 are great Sundays to feel weird. Come and feel weird and then feel less weird as you come back again and again.

Not everybody is going to come back. That's a sad reality, but as Jesus didn't allow people to leave without saying something and asking questions. Let's follow his lead and talk to people who haven't been here in a while. Our Board of Elders is doing that very thing. We can talk to them, too. Don't just let them jump off the faith, and don't you jump off the faith either. Whether the teaching is easy or the teaching is hard, there is no other place to go. Jesus is the one who has the words of eternal life. Amen.