

August 25-26, 2018

"Is it More or is it Less?"

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John 6:56-69

The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

I Kings 8:1, 6, 10-11, 22-30, 41-43; Psalm 84; Ephesians 6:10-20

The late Andy Rooney, curmudgeon commentator on *60 Minutes*, once observed,

*"The two biggest sellers in any bookstore
are the cookbooks and the diet books.
The cookbooks tell you how to prepare the food
and the diet books tell you how not to eat any of it."*¹

After several weeks in John's gospel and all this talk about bread, maybe that's the point John is trying to make. Maybe that's how it is in faith. It's how we respond to God. We're either finding ways to make God more real in our daily lives, or we're trying to resist the tough demands of being a Christian. "Is it more or is it less?"

It must have been something to see a group of followers walk out on Jesus. He watched them walk away then said out loud, "*Are you leaving too?*" That's a deeply heartfelt question because it epitomizes the struggle between the free gift of grace and a faith that demands everything of us.

We remember the crowds that sought him out to be near him. We recall the woman who only wanted to be able to touch the hem of his garment. We think about the open door to faith that "whosoever will" are welcome. We think about the front porch of faith open to all who seek him. But we don't talk so easily about the back door to faith when those who want to leave do so. The church doesn't like to talk about the exit ramp that many take in walking away from God in their lives.

Jesus said it clearly, "*Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few that find it*" (Matthew 7:13-14, NRSV).

John seems to be saying: "*Christ offers you the gracious gift of life. What will you do now? What choice will you make in response to that?*" It's a probing and direct question of the type that makes us uncomfortable. We're uneasy with that kind of conversation in most situations. We're a people of easy relationships that don't push or demand much. We like casual relationships with no reciprocal commitments that must be kept.

¹ Fred Lyon, "The Savior Life Diet," *Lectionary Homiletics*, Vol. VIII, No. 9, August 1997, 21

Christ presents us a succulent serving of grace and nourishment, and its rich aromas tingle in our nostrils. What do we do in response to that? Do we turn up our noses and turn away or do we draw closer? Do we put a clothespin over our noses and resolutely refuse to have any? Or do we breathe it all in and enjoy the tantalizing savor that comes when we allow the meal to move us to hunger and desire?²

Perhaps it boils down to The Choice. We either say Yes to God and the demands of being a follower or we say No and dodge the real issues of living the faith. The gospel of John gives us two persons of faith by which he illustrates what it means to live faith.

First we have Judas, the diet book man. It was Judas who could see it all and obviously held his own judgments about Jesus and the movement Jesus called "the kingdom of God." Judas illustrated the cynical approach to faith demonstrated by his hands closed in a fist. He was an opportunist and held his cards close to the vest.

Instead of taking the bread of life and enjoying the flavor and the texture and giving thanks to God for way that it would sustain his body and bless his soul, he refused to let the bread be the gift of God for his life. He set it aside where it grew stale and shriveled into betrayal. Judas could not find a way to turn loose of his own self-interests but rather was bent on finding a way to make faith suit his own needs. Judas was a diet book sort of man.

But John relieved the anxiety we feel about Judas by telling the story of Peter, the cookbook guy. When Jesus asked, *"Do you also wish to go away?"* Peter couldn't hold himself back. *"Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life."*

Judas wanted to be a part of the action, but only from the fringe. Judas was the window peeper of faith, always watching from the edges of faith but never open to fully launching himself into the demands of risky living.

Peter on the other hand jumped out of boats in the middle of the Sea of Galilee. Peter picked up a soldier's sword and lopped off an ear in defense of Jesus. Peter opened his heart to live fully and completely in faith's intense reality of NOW.

All of us realize the either/or kind of persons I've presented with Judas and Peter are not as neat and simple as I've suggested. Most of us live somewhere in-between those two polar personalities. *Judas or Peter? Cookbook or diet book? Faith or unfaith?* Which will it be? Sometimes I'm more Judas than Peter. And other times I'm more cookbook than diet book. Then again I'm sometimes faith and other times unfaith. How about you?

² Thanks to Rev. Lib McGregor Simmons, pastor of University Presbyterian Church of San Antonio, for the comparison and application of Rooney's comment to give structure to this sermon

In the same way, we have to admit that Judas answered the call of Christ to follow him and he did. He wasn't always the betrayer. There were plenty of times when he offered faithful service to Jesus on the three years they lived and worked together.

Likewise, Peter was occasionally very brave but he also had his moments of failure and fear. In this text, he comes across pretty well, but just a handful of chapters later we watch in absolute terror as he withdraws from Jesus just when the Son of Man needed him most on his way to his crucifixion.

So it might be honest of us all to admit we are servants with mixed motives and mixed outcomes. No one here is qualified to make judgments on behavior or faithfulness. *"All of us have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God."*

So it begs the question: "What kind of church will we be?" Will we be the kind of church that selects certain sins we use to keep people out or will we recognize the church Christ came to inspire is so fully aware of its own sin no one is left out.

Realize: No seeking searcher is kept out because the church is filled with sinners.

Biblical scholar Krister Stendahl adds to the list of commandments this one: *"(Thou) shall not read from the cookbook (without) serving the food."*³

For weeks now we've been listening to Jesus tell us about the bread of life that's been served up to the world ... let's eat and be filled!

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³ Paul Minear, "Homiletical Resources for the Season After Pentecost: The Gospel of John," *Quarterly Review*, Summer 1985, 68-74