

John 6, 56-69  
August 22, 2021

I don't like to think of myself as a "quitter." Few of us do. If you start something, you finish it, you see it to its completion. But I have more than one tote bag full of half-knitted projects (you know--I really should finish that hat I've been knitting for Ryan for going on two years). I have books begun and not completed (Looking at you, "Moby Dick,") I've started more exercise regimens than I could count. In college I dropped classes on more than one occasion because the course work was challenging and I didn't want my grade point average to suffer.

Yet quitting is not always a negative response. I've left relationships that were no longer healthy and fulfilling. I've left jobs when I felt like I had no more room to grow. I have left unhealthy habits and coping mechanisms in search for a fuller self. We've left baseball games in the 8th inning when our team was woefully behind and there is no hope for a comeback.

In today's Gospel reading, which is the conclusion of a long chapter in John, we learn that many of Jesus' followers end up leaving him. Jesus has been preaching about the bread of life. Remember how this passage started? Several weeks ago, the bread of life began with the breaking and sharing of bread--5 loaves, to be exact. In the hands of Jesus, this became enough bread to feed thousands. Jesus fed and promised bread that will never leave you hungry. But eating this bread means devoting oneself to an abundant life that might not feel so abundant at times. In Jesus's body and blood is the life that is beyond life; but sharing in Jesus's body and blood begins to turn some stomachs. In fact, despite his miraculous feeding of the enormous crowd, Jesus begins to lose followers. His poll numbers take a steep decline.

As Reinhold Niebuhr points out, "Jesus had been popular. The multitude had followed him to hear his words, to catch the charm of his personality and to be cured of physical ills. But gradually, as Jesus unfolded the full meaning of his way of life, the multitude found his ideals as difficult as they were engaging and began to desert him, muttering, 'These are hard sayings, who can hear them?'"<sup>1</sup>

These are hard sayings for us, too. We don't get off cleanly just because we have 2,000 years of biblical scholarship between us and them. I can see the questions, because I ask them myself. You mean to tell me that there were followers present at the feeding of the five thousand, and yet, after witnessing such a miracle, found the teachings of Jesus too difficult, and simply walked away? How could they just up and leave during the fourth quarter? Well, as with all things, it's not that simple. And we would do well to examine our faith journeys. When and where have we followed Jesus up to a certain point, and then turned around and went back. Or we let Jesus forge on ahead, vowing to catch up with him? It's true, we were not present on that grassy field where loaves and fishes became holy communion. But we have seen Christ present in food boxes and in serving lines. We have witnessed miracles and reconciliations and the inexplicable persevering of the Body of Christ.

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<sup>1</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr. "To Whom Shall We Go?" *The Christian Century*. March 10, 1927 Accessed Online: <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/1927-03/whom-shall-we-go>

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But the stakes for leaving Jesus are more than grabbing your coat at intermission and heading home. Leaving is tantamount to betrayal, according to John. Karoline Lewis reminds that in John's Gospel, "there is no handing over of Jesus in John. Jesus hands himself over at his arrest because that's what the Good Shepherd does (10:17-18). Betrayal in John is not believing that the abundant life Jesus offers you is real. Betrayal is that which causes you to believe that this life is for everyone else but you. Betrayal is anything and everything that makes you think you aren't someone Jesus could love."<sup>2</sup>

No one wants to think of themselves as capable of betraying Jesus, just as we don't like to identify as quitters.

What Peter is saying in effect is, "What you demand of us is so difficult that we are almost tempted to follow the multitude in their desertion. But you have helped us to look profoundly into the meaning of life and we are not able to find a decent alternative to your way and to your truth." - Reinhold Niebuhr

In my holy imagination, I like to think that those who left Jesus because it was a difficult teaching eventually came back. Maybe they looked for other places to go, and found temporary shelter, but realized that Jesus' words are that of eternal life. Because that's how our life of faith --Jesus tells us to love our neighbor, and we decide that it's too much energy to love the neighbor that doesn't look like us, vote like us, act like us, so we walk away.

I like to think that maybe, we followers of Jesus, end up following Jesus because we have tried all the other options, and Jesus is the only answer. And when we decided that Jesus is the only answer, then our work is filled with an energy. President Kennedy, in his famous Moon Speech, electrified a nation with his answers that a space program--a moon shot, is the kind of challenge The United States was willing to accept. He proclaimed,

"We choose to go to the moon. We choose to go to the moon in this decade and do the other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard, because that goal will serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills, because that challenge is one that we are willing to accept, one we are unwilling to postpone, and one which we intend to win, and the others, too."<sup>3</sup>

We choose to follow Jesus, not because following Jesus is easy, but because it is hard, because that goal will enable us to serve others, and abide in Christ. *Ad astra per aspera*- to the stars, through difficulties. Lord, there are many places we will go, and many times when we will betray you. We are prone to wander, Lord we feel it, but when we do go to you, we find the words of eternal life. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Karoline Lewis, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/dear-working-preacher/not-just-bread-anymore>

<sup>3</sup> J. F. Kennedy, September 12, 1962, Moon Speech at Rice Stadium in Houston, Texas. Accessed here: <https://er.jsc.nasa.gov/seh/ricetalk.htm>