

The Rev. Christine Love Mendoza
The Church of the Good Shepherd
The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost – August 22, 2021
John 6:56-69

Today, we've come to the fifth and final installment in what I call the Dreaded Bread Run. Every three years, we study the sixth chapter of John's Gospel and contemplate Jesus' teaching, "I am the bread of life." Most preachers sigh when these lessons come along, because there is only so much one can say about bread. As an analogy, one runs out of ways of slicing and serving up bread in new and fresh ways. (pun totally intended) By the fifth Sunday of the bread run, I'm often so exasperated that I have been known to threaten to simply stand up and say, "What more can be said? Bread is good. I love Jesus."

The five-course meal that comprises the Dreaded Bread Run begins with John's account of the miraculous Feeding of the Five Thousand. The story of how God, through Jesus, transformed five loaves of bread and two fish into a feast sufficient to sate the hunger of the enormous crowd following Jesus of spiritual seekers, the sick, and the desperate. Such a bounty came from these meager offerings that the leftovers filled twelve baskets to overflowing. And if that weren't enough of a demonstration of divine authority and power, Jesus tops this miracle by walking on water, to the amazement of his disciples.

The other four servings of the sixth chapter in John's Gospel comprise a long discourse wherein Jesus teaches his disciples who he is and what all this means. Unfortunately, any hope of clearing things up is undermined by Jesus' use of challenging allegorical language. Jesus says, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." (6:35) This is confounding even to his most ardent of followers. Then Jesus really brings it home with these shocking words: "Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day... Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me." (6:53-54, 56-57)

Perhaps we have become comfortable with these words out of sheer repetition. Perhaps we no longer realize the alarming brazenness with which Jesus claims divine authority. Perhaps we've become desensitized to the surprising and disturbing allusions to cannibalism and animal sacrifice that Jesus uses to shock his disciples into a new and deeper understanding of his identity and mission.

His disciples, quite understandably, are completely flabbergasted. "This teaching is difficult," they say, "who can accept it?" (6:60) You can almost hear them stammering as they struggle to reconcile what they've seen and heard from this amazing healer and prophet: *"What?! What are you saying? This faith and relationship with you and the God you call Father is hard to understand. How do I accept what doesn't make sense...what seems impossible...what I can't comprehend?"* "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?"

I love that these words are spoken by his disciples, the people closest to Jesus, who have seen this man do miraculous deeds of power, and who have had the most intimate access to him and his teaching. They seem to speak the words of all of the hearts of Jesus' followers over the millennia: "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?"

The faith that Jesus calls us to requires a radical transformation of heart and mind. It requires an acceptance of what can seem impossible to embrace. Christian theology is comprised of many such difficult doctrines such as: the divinity and humanity of Jesus; the Trinity of God as three persons in one unity; divine sacrifice for the eternal life of mortals... just to name a few. Is it any

wonder that some many of us, like the disciples, cry out within our hearts: These teachings are so hard; who can accept them? How can we believe?

For many of us, we have attempted to develop our religious faith by way of understanding and accepting church doctrine. We have sought faithful relationship with God through our mind – through comprehension and intellectual assent to a system of doctrinal statements describing the nature of God and humanity, and our relationship to God through the person of Jesus. In this way, we attempt to develop faith through the act of belief.

I read an interesting opinion article in the New York Times last week in which the author, Ross Douthat, presents an argument that the belief in God is perhaps even more plausible in our modern era than is commonly thought. Douthat starts strong with his assertion that many highly educated people now spend much of their time hovering at the doorways to the faith – lingering at the precipice yet unable to fully accept and inhabit the tradition. He writes, “They relate to religion on a communal or philosophical level. They want to pass on a clear ethical inheritance to their children. They find certain God-haunted writers interesting or inspiring, and the biblical cadences of the civil rights era more moving than secular defenses of equality or liberty. Yet they struggle to make the leap of faith, to reach a state where the supernatural parts become believable and the grace to accept the impossible is bestowed.”¹

This certainly sounds familiar to me. Indeed, I spent many years loitering at the doorway of faith. I read a multitude of books and attended a great variety of houses of worship (both Christian and not). Not knowing how to take the leap of faith that was repeatedly advised to me by believers, I pursued an understanding of God through my mind by pursuing an academic understanding of religion. But I found this to be shallow water. Even majoring in comparative religious studies in college may have helped me gain a better comprehension of the religious concept of God, it did little to develop my faith.

Where I think Douthat’s argument for faith in God fails is not in the reasoning of its defense – indeed he makes a strong and compelling logical case. His argument fails, however, because he attempts to bring the threshold-loiterers to faith through logical argument in the first place. My journey of the hard road of faith has taught me that one comes to faith not through belief – or the intellectual assent to doctrinal statements –but rather through experience with the living God.

It has been my experience of God and the movements of the Spirit in the world around me that have brought me to faith. And then, through this lens of experience – and my resulting nascent faith – I was able to begin to embrace and accept the teachings of Jesus and the Church. I have learned that faith is much more nuanced and substantial than belief. Faith is deeply personal and comes from our own unique experience of God moving and active in our lives and the world around us. Faith is developed from the many momentary glancing encounters with the divine that occur amid the ordinariness of everyday life. For me, faith hasn’t been built on the foundation of huge miracles of healing but rather the collected abundance of tiny interactions with the natural world and with my fellow humans that reveal the flowing stream of eternal life – that reality that lies deeper than what we immediately see and experience on the surface.

“This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?” This is the eternal question uttered by nearly all confounded followers of Christ. In the midst of my own spiritual crises, I know I have cried out to God with words to similar effect. Perhaps you, too, have lamented the same at some point in your life. In response, I offer the simple words spoken from a place of deep truth by a three-year-old girl named Scout when she announced to her mother, “Mama, I can do hard things.”

Developing faith is hard. Living a life that both reveals God and is in accordance with the great commandment to love one another as Christ loved us is hard. Accepting that living such a life allows us to abide in him and drink deeply from the waters of eternal life – this is hard. We may not

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/14/opinion/sunday/faith-religion.html>

be strong enough or courageous enough to do this on our own, but, with God's grace, we can do hard things.

And praise God for that! We have so many hard things to do now. The coming months, years, and decades will be filled with existential problems that have no easy solutions. They will present us with challenges that threaten to render us nearly immobilized with their sheer enormity. Possessing living faith born from the lived and embodied experience of God, we will have the courage and the resources to do the hard work in front of us. With the eyes and ears of our hearts now opened to the presence and action of the living God, we will find we can do hard things. We can end this pandemic. We can heal our suffering planet. We can turn our swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks. We can love and protect our neighbor and the strangers among us. Through a faith born of the experience with the living God, we can embrace these teachings and bring new life to the world.

Amen.