

In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

For the fifth week in a row, and still following along, and in order, in the middle of John's gospel. And repeating verses from the week before.

More talk about eat my flesh and drink my blood. There are just a handful of followers left, from the original 5,000, to hear this. And some of the remaining disciples are grumbling, saying "This teaching is difficult. Who can accept it?"

They have been with him just about three years. He knows them, and they know him...and they know, from first hand experience and right up close, all about his extraordinary love and compassion. Extraordinary love and compassion for them individually, as well as for complete strangers out on the road.

Yet, in spite of that love...for these closest of followers...Jesus does not soften in his response, because he cannot. He cannot. As he is speaking for God his Father. And so, some folks hit the road in a different direction. This teaching is not for them.

Jesus asks his core of twelve the same. And Simon Peter is quoted as saying, essentially, "You have the words of eternal life, and we believe that you are the Holy One of God. So, where else are we going to go?"

The grumblers are right...this teaching IS difficult. It is difficult precisely because it comes from a different place than humanity does. It is part of us, and we are part of it, but it is too difficult for us to approach on our own. And the response of Jesus? Sure, it is difficult. It is all about spirit and life. The flesh is useless, he says. There are some who will not believe. Why? Because, Jesus says, no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father."

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Well, this teaching is not for most of them...and, left unchanged, it is not for most of us either.

This series in the middle of John's gospel is making me edgy. Just like Jesus, who had to give the hard words and message to those whom he loved and shared with, I have been with you long enough to care for you as well. And I have struggled emotionally with a prophetic sense of loss over who, in this parish, has asked and continues to ask for God's mercy in this way.

Those who the Father brings to me...those who eat my flesh and drink my blood...I will raise them up on the last day...he said last week. No one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father, he says. Who has asked the Father to do that?

Throughout the gospels are instances when Jesus either performs a miracle, or instructs with a deeply revealing insight...and then strictly instructs that they not tell about it. Keep it to yourselves,

and do not let anyone else know. It seems strange, or at least counter-intuitive because, after all, we now read about it in the Bible...the most published, sold and presumably read text in history. So now, theoretically, everyone knows. Or do we?

Well, it is now revealed to us through these verses in John's gospel. That Jesus knew there would be many...many...who would follow along, but would not believe. Would not...could not...understand his ministry. The words "would not" and "could not" have different meanings, although those distinctions are becoming lost in our contemporary presence.

"Would not" means that these so-called followers presumably knew better, but consciously chose to ignore or disregard or disobey...which is the story of the Garden of Eden.

"Could not" means that they were unable to make that choice, and Jesus reveals through these passages that decision, that choice, that opportunity rests with God the Father.

We also hear the gospel pressing the same message in Matthew, chapter 22, verses 1 through 14. Let me read it now.

Many are called, but few are chosen. Notice Jesus said that good and bad were invited to the wedding hall, so perhaps we might drop our own need to classify the worthiness of others because, in the end, it will do us far more harm than good.

But no wedding robe? What is that? It is one thing to be invited, but it is quite another..in the sight of God...to give up one's heart to God and enter into genuine, joyful celebration with God.

We are reminded of the celebration of the sacrament of baptism...when we offer prayers to God for that person as a candidate. At one point in the service of baptism, those of gathered are asked to please open the Book of Common Prayer and look at page 305 and 306. Here they are again.....

Why are those prayers in there? Why do we ask God for these blessings for all those who come for baptism? Because, as humans, we cannot go through this alone. We cannot get ourselves into position to hear the words of Jesus as eternal life. Jesus says so himself...that only God the Father can bring others to him.

We have to ask God the Father...have to...ask him to bring the baptized into closer communion with God through Jesus as the Christ. Each of us has to ask for that from God, and all the time, for a lifelong process of transformation. That is our greatest, deepest, most personal prayer...the one we need to pray over and over.

Not for world peace. Not for better health. Not even the Lord's Prayer...because we need to get to the place where we can share with Jesus in THAT prayer. No...THE most essential prayer for each and every one of us...the prayer Jesus offered over and over and over....Not my will, but yours. Make me into the person you would have me be.

That prayer is continued each and every Sunday Holy Eucharist service...when we ask God to “cleanse the thoughts of our hearts...cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit”. Why? So that we may perfectly love you and worthily magnify your Holy Name, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Those words mean something. More correctly...they mean everything.

Our eternal life depends completely on praying from the center of our hearts that God the Father help each of us to transform our lives into who it is that God wants us to be...and that God the Father answers that prayer by opening each of us into the way of Jesus, as the Christ.

When we pray at baptism, we ask God to bring that person with open heart and mind and soul into the promise of his or her fuller being. We ask God to protect them, and to be with them, because...in the fullness of each person’s spirit and being, he and she will need God’s help along the way of life.

All of the baptized....those to come and those here before them, will all need God’s help because, at the bottom of it all, the teaching IS difficult. Being baptized is the wondrous, joyful, exuberant start of it all, and the bread of Heaven is there for the taking...but in order to digest that bread, and to realize the nutrients of that bread...we have to ask the Father first. We need to ask God...not by mere words, but in the heart...to do for us in the same way we pray on page 305 and 306.

Millions have been baptized over the centuries, but only a relatively few have trusted God to transform them. Millions have been labeled as Christians, but too few have asked God to enter their hearts for the fundamental changes that allow one to live in witness...to live in the fullness of life that God intends for all.

Jesus knows this..and he challenges his disciples to proclaim what...or what not...has been revealed to them. Have they...or have they not...asked God to transform them so that they can receive the bread of life? Do they...and do we...just go through the motions?

Simon Peter answers in a way that shows God does provide. Simple men and women, hard laborers, without specialized education. No one special at all. But God took these simple people, and it was God who changed them, opened their hearts, and put them in the place of formation by following Jesus. These disciples were not many, but they were enough.

And after all of that...after years of following Jesus, and seeing him, and hearing him, and watching him with others, they ask in return, “Lord, to whom will we go?”

To whom will all our baptized go? To whom will you go, dear people of this parish...in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit? Amen.