

## Crossroad Moments (John 6:56-69)

A little known piece of film-making includes previewing a rough cut of the finished film to a test audience to gauge reaction. If the test audience doesn't like it, the studio reads the comment cards and often changes objectionable parts to suit audience taste. Obviously movie studios want to make money on their films, so changing them to increase their appeal makes sense.

If the Apostle John had run this portion of Christ's story by a test audience, and were he following movie studio strategy, he might have changed this piece of it to represent the crowd applauding Jesus and joining his cause. Because as it stands, the ending to this portion is rather bleak. You'll recall that previous to this Jesus had performed a mighty miracle feeding 5000+ hungry people by multiplying a single meal to banquet portions. Then he walked on water through a storm to join the disciples he had sent off to Capernaum on the other side of the Lake from where the feast took place. The crowd had pursued him to Capernaum in hopes of further amazement. What they got instead was, to them, difficult teaching by way of provocative vocabulary that seemed to suggest cannibalism as the means to everlasting life. The comment cards read, "This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?" Some in the throng considered themselves to be his disciples—not of the 12, but among the larger community of those who followed him. Aware of their consternation, Jesus asked, "Does this offend you?" And then he went on to say that the words he had spoken to them are spirit and they are life while acknowledging that some did not believe. The outcome, recorded in vs. 66, was that from this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him.

The crowd of followers reduced from thousands to just the twelve again. This is not the plot of a typical heroic narrative. From the world's point of view it looks like an epic failure. But it was reality and precisely what John wanted to convey to his readers who knew from the beginning of his gospel that Jesus is the Word, with God from the beginning, himself God made flesh dwelling with humankind in the world of God's creation who knew him not. Our passage today underscores that idea.

One scholar commenting on this passage concludes that John intends to convey that this type of teaching, which crops up repeatedly in his gospel, is difficult by design—they are meant to provoke and challenge us by reshaping our typical ways of thinking about things, encouraging us to wrestle and ruminate, and ultimately helping us to cross over into new territory. This makes sense as Jesus came to introduce us to a greater reality captured in the phrase, "the kingdom of God," which speaks to the idea of our living in God's presence and activity right now rather than just as a future hope. It's a reality that includes our present experience within the context of God's immediate presence and care to the place where we realize a mutual indwelling of ourselves in God's life, and God's life dwelling within us by the Spirit. In order to convey this rather incomprehensible reality, it stands to reason that the most fruitful way to do this is to stretch conventional words in unconventional directions through parables and sometimes through deliberately provocative vocabulary that jolts us to think deeply about the meaning behind it.

This means that there are likely to be times in our life of faith when we have trouble wrapping our head around what Jesus or his early followers taught. We'll find ourselves in the same situation as the crowd in our text—this is a hard teaching. Who can accept it? We'll have come to a crossroads moment in faith that may involve confusion or raise doubt—we might even be a bit skeptical. What do we do with that matters, because in some cases it can lead to a crisis of faith that challenges beliefs we've long held. We get uncomfortable in that place because, whether by direct teaching or assumption we've acquired the sense that there isn't any room in faith for uncertainty, or doubt—that asking questions or seeking clarity is somehow synonymous with a lack of faith. We're simply to accept what we don't understand. Archie Bunker once famously described faith as believing in things you wouldn't ordinarily believe except that they're in the Bible. And while I don't accept that definition, I'm willing to concede that this is how some people think of it. His definition is a more colloquial expression of what's otherwise called a leap of faith which is popularly understood as accepting the tenets of belief without understanding or warrant. In other words, one accepts a certain portion of faith's

precepts on the basis of reason and the rest one simply accepts as faith, and in this context it means hoping the rest to be true. But that's a pretty flimsy foundation for faith, and I doubt this is an issue for us.

The more likely scenario for us as Christ followers is when we bump up against one of these difficult teachings that doesn't quite fit our understanding of faith. Or we might find ourselves perplexed over an issue in our contemporary situation that isn't directly addressed in the teaching of Jesus or that of the Apostles. What do you do with that crossroads moment?

Initially it will be helpful to allow yourself to sit with the problem. Give yourself time and space to consider it. Hang in there and realize that this doesn't need to be a make or break moment, but a what-is-God-teaching-me? moment. This is time to follow Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, to ask, seek, and knock. Ask God for clarity, seek out resources that speak to the issue, and be persistent in your quest. Realize that it may take time to work out—we live in a microwave era, but some of these challenges are better met with a crock pot. I clearly remember wrestling with a particular passage of scripture; I couldn't make sense of it. I prayed about it and left it to settle unanswered in the back of my mind. I continued to read and to study—not on that particular issue directly, but as I do, reading widely to broaden the scope of understanding. One afternoon—I remember exactly where I was sitting—while reading an article, the author addressed the very issue I was wrestling with in such a way that I grasped the sense of the passage. I offered a quick prayer of thanks and lifted that passage out of the crock pot. I had discovered what God was teaching me.

A crossroads moment may require us to expand our view or understanding of God. This was the situation that faced the early church when Peter had preached to Gentiles who received the Holy Spirit as a result—the predominantly Jewish Christians called him on the carpet for this as it challenged their previous understanding of God. Having listened to Peter's explanation, they had no further objections and praised God saying, "So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life." Their previously narrow view of God expanded, and this was later confirmed at a council in Jerusalem. God is always bigger than our imaginations allow—crossroad moments push us into a greater appreciation for the breadth, width, height, and depth of who God is and what that means for who God loves.

A crossroads moment can release us from a mechanistic model of faith, where our faith is more contractual than covenantal. What I mean by this is that we can slip into the idea where faith is more or less an exchange between ourselves and God, where we do "this," and God does "that." The moment of crisis occurs when we've done "this," but God hasn't done "that." And this can lead to a severe crisis of faith because in most cases we'll not spend time examining the validity of our model of faith, we'll lean more in the direction of questioning the goodness of God or even God's existence. Or we get caught in the despair of self-recrimination judging ourselves at fault for somehow failing to hold up our end of the contract. It can lead to bitterness and crushing disillusionment, until we realize—if we've given it time—that God's promise is to be present with us in all of our life's moments, our triumphs and our disappointments, our joy and our sorrow, in health and sickness, providing exactly what we need in all of those moments whether or not we tangibly realize it in the moment.

A crossroads moment can liberate us from the rigidity of moralistic faith, a faith defined solely by behaviors. Of course actions are important. James makes the point in his epistle that faith without works is dead. There are behaviors that are always consistent with God's desire and purposes; likewise there are behaviors that are never within the scope of God's values or Christlikeness. But these behaviors are the result of inner transformation, they flow out of who we are, they are not in themselves the focus. Without inner work, which is the focus of the Spirit's work, a focus on behaviors or outcomes morphs into legalism leading to a battle between what we want to do and what we ought to do. It becomes a life of conflict where we've exchanged one law for another. This is not the easy yoke Jesus offers. In Christ, the primary focus is on who you are, not what you do. Performance is not the issue—the actions will come when the heart is right. Let go of outcomes and participate with the Spirit's work of transformation.

You see, friends, none of these crossroads moments need to spell the end of our faith journey. Accept that there are going to be things we don't immediately grasp, there are going to be conundrums in faith that challenge. Think about what's really happening in our faith experience. We're entering into the life and thought of God, and while some of that process is simple and accessible as it is meant to be, growing into this greater reality is going to present some difficulties. There are going to be challenges, but these are meant to push us into higher thought where we'll have to change our mind about what we've previously thought. That's not weakness, it's growth. On a strictly human level, how perplexing would life be if you tried to live it with your third grade understanding? And yet, this is precisely the problem facing many in faith who rely on introductory understanding of spiritual matters for the remainder of their lifelong journey of faith. Our growth in faith relies on adopting a different point of view for life, on our seeing life and this world through the eyes of Christ, thinking carefully and strategically with the mind of Christ, and living by alternative motive. One that finds us living for the glory of Christ, that he be exalted in our character, behaviors, and interactions with others. It is not that others see how great we are, but how great Christ is.

And when we've allowed this to master us, we won't find ourselves turning away from Christ in the face of difficult teaching or choices. Instead we'll find ourselves in the company of those, who like Peter will say, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God." AMEN