

## **14 Pentecost, Proper 16. John 6:56-69. Feast of Kickoff Sunday.**

The obvious joke to make here is that if the listeners walked out when Jesus was talking about bread, it seems entirely unfair to expect us preachers to bring down the house with the same material. But in fact, this last installment of what is usually called the “bread of life discourse” is full of pathos and has a lot to say to us today. We’ve been working our way through the sixth chapter of John for over a month. The series began with Jesus miraculously feeding five thousand people with just a few loaves of bread and a little fish, and since then he’s been trying to explain to folks that it’s not really about the bread. While everyone is mesmerized by what Jesus has done, he is trying to direct their attention to who he is.

It hasn’t at any point in the whole chapter gone very smoothly. The people have grumbled and Jesus has explained some more and tried again and revealed more of himself, and it has only led to more grumbling. Today that grumbling reaches a kind of apex and it’s no longer quite something where Jesus can try again. The end of this long trudge through the bread of life discourse gives us a heartbreaking rejection and a life-saving acceptance.

We tend not to think of Jesus getting his heart broken. He’s always so many steps out in front of everyone else, it’s hard to imagine the surprise that is so often the precursor to heartbreak. But what has happened over the course of the last month, the course of this chapter, is that Jesus has kind of bared his soul to his admirers who have been going by the term “disciples.” A large group, bigger than twelve, has been following him around, cheering his miracles, accepting his teachings, going from place to place with him. And now after a spectacular public miracle he tries to tell them who he really is. He takes apart their guesses and surmises of what he’s like: he’s not just a wonder worker, he’s not like Moses, he’s not like any of the things or people that have come before.

He tries to tell them, these admirers and would-be friends, who he really is. And their response is, “This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?” And they leave. It sounds a little peevish when Jesus retorts, “no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father.” Like, “oh, they must not be the ones God picked to be my friends.” But I think it might sound a little different if we read it as the somewhat defensive, slightly resigned response of someone who has just been rejected and so is in pain. The bottom comes after this outburst when he turns to the Twelve who remain and asks, “Do you also wish to go away?”

Now, I’m sure that each of you has only relationships built through and through on loving honesty. But I bet the person next to you in the pew is more like me, and is well-practiced in masking that deep down truest self. Most of us don’t do what Jesus does here, really try to show people who we truly are. And we don’t do it because we’re afraid that if we do, what happened to Jesus will happen to us. Perhaps even, we have tried it before and have been rejected. We present ourselves at work, parties, the church, and maybe even to our families not as we are, but as we want others to see us or as we think they want to see us. We choose to wear masks and—and here’s the kicker—we impose

masks on other people as well. Perhaps from the purest motives, even to help us love, we love not who a person really is, but a version of them that is more to our taste or more useful to us.

The problem here is that love cannot abide falseness. It must walk hand in hand with truth and it's no good for anyone to be in love with a mask. Our faith calls us not to be the person who we think will be liked, but the person God created and calls us to be. And it calls us to love the real person we are in relationship with, not some construction we've made or only the parts that are especially convenient to us. It's terrifying because if even Jesus was rejected when people found out who he really was, what chance do we have of still being loved? Our self-revelation probably won't be a matter of indicating that we're really the Son of God who created the world, but something grimmer or even a touch tawdry.

Here's why we can still do it and honestly probably why Jesus could do it: because we know or should know that we are always already loved and accepted completely by God. That isn't to say that we are the way we should be. Christianity is all about transformation. But God knows and loves us truly every step of the journey, even with full knowledge of all those things that we'd like to hide from everyone else. And once we've opened ourselves up to the real love of God, we'll find that we'd quite like the love in the rest of our lives to be real and honest, too.

Of course this story is normally not first about being who we really are, but about accepting Jesus as he really is. Even after a full chapter of explanations, I'm not sure that the twelve apostles really fully got it. How could they, when there's a pretty good argument to be made that we're still trying to work it out two thousand years later? But Peter tells us why they stay: to whom should we go? You have the words of eternal life. There's a kind of resignation there, an acknowledgement that even though things have gotten difficult and confusing, this is the only game in town—at least for them, at least for us. Who would choose to live without the words of eternal life? Who would choose to live without taking the chance to love and be loved truly? Who would want to be anything other than what God has created and called them to be?