

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
Ephesians 6:10-20, Psalm 84, John 6:56-69  
August 23, 2015  
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This is now the fourth Sunday that we have heard the discourse on the bread of life. Jesus must think we are really hungry.

Last week the curious Jewish leaders were rightly disturbed with Jesus' discussion of needing to eat his flesh and drink his blood. Here we find disciples troubled by Jesus claiming to be the true bread that came down from heaven. "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?" they say.

In their defense, we must remember they have been raised in a tradition that claims to have only one God, and here, Jesus, a human being, is claiming a divine homeland.

We are not surprised, or at least we shouldn't be, that Jesus' followers are few. Jesus was breaking new religious ground. As a matter of fact, we might even say that before the church of Jesus Christ exploded across the Roman Empire, it sputtered some early on.

We know that in western civilizations today, the church is losing members. We may even have good friends that have stopped attending regularly. It is possible that the disciples who leave in John's gospel today joined the ranks after Jesus miraculously fed them or healed them. They were in it perhaps for the material benefits only. Then once these stopped, and Jesus asks them to travel on the spiritual path of self-sacrifice and inner transformation, they find their journey with Jesus too difficult so they drop out.

We sometimes hear people say today, "I don't get anything out of going to church." Once maybe they did benefit or at least their children benefited, but once the kids are grown and gone, many of the parents disappear as well. Other people come to church only when their life is out of control for one reason or another, but once things stabilize, they resume previous patterns of non-participation.

I understand why some leave a church because they don't agree with the leadership or the denomination has taken a position they can't abide. I don't understand when they never attend another church or try to find a more compatible denomination.

Stick-with-it-ness and loyalty are more and more rare these days. Church was never primarily intended to satisfy material needs, but as we have heard for the past three weeks, Jesus wants to satisfy spiritual needs or soul hungers and thirsts.

At the same time, Jesus demands a lot of us. Remember when he said these things?

Give to everyone who asks.

Love Jesus more than husband, wife, mother, father and children.

Do not resist one who is evil, and bless those who persecute you.

Forgive seventy or seven times seventy times.

Offer the other cheek for a slap as well, and go the extra mile.

If someone takes your coat, give him your shirt as well.

To truly gain life, we must be willing to lose our life.

To be greatest in the kingdom of God, one must aspire to be the servant of all.

To be first, one must take the last place.

How are you doing so far?

And let us not forget:

Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of God.

It will be harder for a rich man to get into the kingdom of God than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle.

He who lives by the sword will also die by the sword.

Then there are the parables about the prodigal son who gets his full sonship back, and the workers who get a full days wage for an hour of work.

Many of Jesus' teachings, sayings and parables are difficult for sure, but we know that all these are intended to make us grow and change and be better people and positively impact a world that can be pretty messed up at times. Is it fair to say that while we can't fully comprehend the mysteries of our faith nor understand or fully agree with all Jesus' sayings or teachings, we are still convinced that Jesus has to be on to something great well beyond our small mindedness? It's either all total lunacy or brilliant, far reaching, wisdom we have to spend our lives trying to better comprehend, study and follow.

Christianity and church attendance, while once the norm for westerners, is more and more becoming the road less travelled. It always takes greater courage to choose be in the minority.

VMI graduate Jonathan Daniels is a good example. Fifty years ago this month, Jonathan, a white Episcopal seminarian, was shot and killed while saving the life of a young black teenage girl in Alabama. While preparing for ordination at the Episcopal Theological Seminary in Cambridge, Massachusetts, he and another seminarian travelled to Selma, Alabama, to join the march for voting rights from Selma to Montgomery, in March of 1965. He got permission from the seminary to study on his own and complete that spring semester in Alabama, where he tutored children, helped register voters and connected poor black residents with federal aid agencies.

He also worked toward integrating a white Episcopal church in the area. All during this time, he lived with a local black family.

He decided to return to Alabama that summer, after taking his seminary exams, to continue the work he had been doing earlier. On August 14th, Daniels and several others were arrested for demonstrating outside a whites-only store. After six days in jail, he was released. Daniels, a white Catholic priest and two other black female activists then walked to get a soda from a nearby store that served both races. On this day, however, the entranceway was barred by an unpaid special deputy policeman holding a shotgun. As he raised the gun to fire on one of the black woman, Jonathan Daniels stepped in front of her and was instantly killed by the blast. He was just 26 years old. As the others ran off in fear, the deputy shot the white priest in the back. The policeman was later acquitted of manslaughter by an all-white jury.

Jonathan Daniels is rightly in our Episcopal Calendar of Saints. His day of special recognition is August 14.

Our faith is not for those who would take the course of least resistance or those willing to just go along with the majority. Our faith tests and challenges us to the core of our being so we can see what we are made of or, better, what God can make us into.

Jesus and life's occurrences will continually ask us if we, too, will accept the gospel challenge. But let us not go the way of those who are in it just for what they can get out of it. Let's stay the course because we know Jesus is slowly giving us a richly transformed life we could never have imagined when we first signed on. Like Peter, we can now say without having to think or pause, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life." AMEN.