

Digesting Jesus (Part II): The Leftovers

John 6: 57-67

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. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever.” He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum.

When many of his disciples heard it, they said, “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?” But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, “Does this offend you? Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. But among you there are some who do not believe.” For Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe, and who was the one that would betray him. And he said, “For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father.”

Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. So Jesus asked the twelve, “Do you also wish to go away?” Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.

The story began five weeks ago with a feast for 5,000 people. It began with five barley loaves and two fish. Expansively multiplying. From Jesus’ hands to his inner circle of disciples, to some other disciples. Bread passing to the Jewish religious leaders, then to all women, men and children curious about Jesus. After the crowd feasted, only twelve baskets remained—the leftovers.

The next day the crowd came back for more, but Jesus’ tone changes:

“Stop chasing after bread that perishes and start working for the food that endures. I’m the Bread of Life, whoever comes to me will never be hungry again.”

Most of the crowd grumbled and said, “What’s he talking about being the bread? I thought we were going to get some more food.” And when they realized Jesus wasn’t offering up another free meal, they turned around and went back home.

Still Jesus keeps going:

“I’m the bread that came down from heaven. The manna of your ancestors perished, but whoever believes in me has the bread of eternal life.”

“Did he just say he was from heaven?” the religious leaders scoffed. And they spit on the ground as they headed back to their jobs in Jerusalem.

At this point most of the people have left, but still Jesus keeps going:

“Unless you chow down on my flesh and guzzle down my blood you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me and I in them.”

That’s when the story says his own disciples begin to shake their heads. “This is too difficult a teaching. Who can digest it?” And his followers left, going back to wherever it was they came from.

The church that expanded overnight to five-thousand souls quickly trickles down with each offensive statement Jesus makes until the only ones left are the twelve—the leftovers.

What do you and I do when following Jesus gets difficult? How do we digest his teachings that push us, or stretch us, or offend us? Do the ears shut down? Do the inner walls start going up? I’m struck by how often we make Jesus out to be nice and warm when so often in our stories he is downright offensive. Oh, he offends with his actions: he doesn’t wash his hands. He hangs out in broad daylight with scandalous women at wells. He flips over money tables in churches. Then there are his words: “You’ve turned God’s house into a den of robbers!” Or “The last will be first and the first will be last.” Or “You can’t serve God’s agenda while focusing on money at the same time.” Then there are his stories about filthy Samaritans who are the heroes and field-workers who only work for one hour, getting paid the same as someone who has been breaking their back all day. Honestly, how many weeks do we think Jesus would last in an American pulpit? How many good potential members do we think Jesus would scare away? So what do we do when Jesus pushes, or stretches, or offends us?

Well, remember who does stick around? The leftover twelve. After everyone else leaves Jesus turns around and antagonizes them as well, “Well, do you want to leave too?!” And what do they say? “Lord, where else can we go?” They have already invested too much. They have seen how faithful he was. They have heard the words of eternal life stirring within him and, in the phrasing of the old Black spiritual, they said, “I Believe I’ll Run On and See what the Ends Gonna Be.” Where else can we go?

It reminds me of a couple who we went to church with in Chicago. The husband was a truck driver who missed the step one day while climbing off his rig. He did a 180 flip in the air landing on the asphalt head first. They rushed him to the hospital on a stretcher, wearing a neck brace. They ran tests and took X-rays. Amazingly, they found nothing was wrong with him. The doctors asked him if he was the praying type, because after a fall like that he should’ve been paralyzed, if not dead. The couple became overwhelmed with gratitude for what they believed was a sign from God. The husband would often testify saying, “God must have a purpose for me because God saved me for a reason.” A few months later, he was riding his motorcycle around a big curve when a car full of teenagers rolled a stop sign just as he was rounding the bend. He died on the way to the hospital. After his funeral his widow disappeared from the church. One month turned into two, into three, four... Then one Sunday she walked through the church doors. She could barely hold herself up, her eyes swollen from the tears. And as the congregation surrounded her in prayer, she wept and wailed, “I’m so angry at you God! I am so disappointed! I have so many questions. None of it makes any sense!” Then her voice began to tremble: “But where else can I go?”

We understand the power of those words. We follow Jesus and at some point, we arrive at a crossroad moment where we get to decide if we are committed to the journey or not. We arrive at moments when we wonder if God is even there. We arrive at moments when we might feel like following Jesus is all a waste of our precious time. There are moments when we hear what we don't want to hear, or we are asked to do what we don't want to do. There are times when we are tired of the work and wonder if we have the strength to keep going. There are times when we feel alone, abandoned and afraid, and it is all-too tempting to pack up our faith in a box and send it floating down the river. But friends, this is the God of life and love. The God who calls and *chooses us* to do holy work in the world. We come to the crossroad moment and we get to answer the question, "Do you want to leave, too?" And many will say 'yes' and go back to the life they knew. But some will echo those leftover disciple's words: "O Lord, where else can we go?"

But here's another word of caution: the more we digest the gospel, the longer we wrestle with Jesus' teachings, the more we will become like the Holy One who offends. Of course, we don't try to offend. And for those of us who are from the south, we work really hard at not offending anyone! But the truth is the gospel will both comfort the world and it will confront the world for the sake of harmony and justice.

Years ago, the gospel got inside a woman named Grace Thomas. The name probably doesn't mean much to you. There isn't any reason it should. Grace lived in Atlanta during the segregation era of the 50's with her husband and family. In order to help with the family finances Grace got a job as a secretary at the State Capital Building where she became interested in politics. From there she went to night school where she earned her law degree. One night at the dinner table, she shocked her family when she announced that she was going to run for Governor of the state of Georgia. In 1954, there were nine candidates running for the seat that year: eight of them men, the ninth was Grace. Each candidate running in 1954 had to take a position on one divisive issue: *Brown vs. the Board of Education*. All eight men running for governor said that all citizens should resist the decision with every ounce of moral fiber they had. But Grace, and only Grace, said this was a sign of the coming of justice. Her campaign slogan was "Say Grace at the polls." Except very few did. She ended up finishing ninth out of the nine candidates.

Now one would think after such a crushing defeat, Grace would've hung up her political ambitions. *But still, Grace kept going*. Eight years later, in 1962 she decided to run for governor again. 1962: civil rights was in full force; the racial climate was red hot. There was political division and mob hostility toward anyone who was associated with the activist's ideology. During her campaign Grace received death threats aimed at her and her family, her home was vandalized. *But still, Grace kept going*. As she made her way on the campaign trail she ended up in a town named Louisville, Georgia. It was there, in Louisville, GA where Grace gave a speech that no one would ever forget. You see, in the center of Louisville, GA was not a courthouse, or a monument. In the public square was an old slave market. A place where the town would gather to buy and sell human beings. And that's where Grace decided to give her speech from. As she gave her speech with the venue of the slave market behind her, she started, "This has passed away and a new day has come. It is time for the citizens of this state to break down the

walls that separate us and to join together in harmony and justice.” She hardly finished the sentence when the crowd started to become agitated. Someone in the back began shouting, “Are you a communist?” Taken aback she said, “No.” “Well where did you get those gall darned ideas from?” Then Grace lifted her finger, pointing it in the direction where there stood a steeple of a church. “I got them from there, in my Sunday School class.” Who knows how many Graces we have, learning from our teachers in our Sunday school classes.

The more the words of eternal life live inside of us, the longer we keep going with Jesus’ teachings, the more we become like the Holy One of God who offends for the sake of harmony and justice.

Who can digest such difficult teachings? Perhaps only those who are leftover wondering, “Lord, where else can we go?”