

DECISIONS, DECISIONS

John 6:56-69

Intro

We hop back into the Gospel of John this morning to hear Jesus finishing up his back and forth about how he is the true bread from heaven...and just how difficult that reality is to swallow (insert groan here).

But even when you get past the puniness of it, what Jesus is saying is difficult to hear, let alone understand. Even today, there are people who hear these words and think that Christians are either cannibals (eating the body and drinking the blood), or delusional ('this guy has been dead for 2000 years...and they think that a little piece of bread and a little shot glass of juice somehow still connect to his actual body and blood').

Well, the confusion and doubt were absolutely on display when Jesus first said these things as well to the point that people who followed Jesus initially (and no, we don't know what that timeline actually means) walked away from Jesus. They believed in him: at some level they believed in him. And they walked away.

In our passage this morning, Jesus is responding to that reality with the chosen 12. As you hear their reaction, ask yourself, where are you at? If push came to shove, where are you at? The scripture reads this way.

John 6:56-69

⁵⁶Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. ⁵⁷Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. ⁵⁸This 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.' ⁵⁹He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum.

⁶⁰When many of his disciples heard it, they said, 'This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?' ⁶¹But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, 'Does this offend you? ⁶²Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? ⁶³It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. ⁶⁴But 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. ⁶⁵And he said, 'For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father.'

⁶⁶Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. ⁶⁷So Jesus asked the twelve, 'Do you also wish to go away?' ⁶⁸Simon Peter answered him, 'Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. ⁶⁹We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.'

Joshua 24:1-2, 14-18

Intro

Our second passage reminds us that the reality of people walking away from God was not just a New Testament issue: the Israelites had that down pat long before they finally claimed the Promised Land.

Our passage shows that as the leader of the Israelites after Moses' death, Joshua, brings all the head honchos together and presents them with a choice: who are you going to follow? The gods whom their ancestors followed prior to their ultimate enslavement in Egypt...or the God who led them out of that bondage? There isn't a threat of anything happening if they choose one way (or the other). Just a choice.

The choice is still there and it needs to be answered...every day...every hour...sometimes it feels like every minute. Whom will you choose? The scripture reads this way.

Joshua 24:1-2, 14-18

24 Then Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem, and summoned the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel; and they presented themselves before God. ²And Joshua said to all the people, 'Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: Long ago your ancestors—Terah and his sons Abraham and Nahor—lived beyond the Euphrates and served other gods.

14 'Now therefore revere the Lord, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. ¹⁵Now if you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.'

16 Then the people answered, 'Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods; ¹⁷for it is the Lord our God who brought us and our ancestors up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and who did those great signs in our sight. He protected us along all the way that we went, and among all the peoples through whom we passed; ¹⁸and the Lord drove out before us all the peoples, the Amorites who lived in the land. Therefore we also will serve the Lord, for he is our God.'

'Decisions, Decisions'

I did some really basic data mining this week, which I know will excite so many of you, so I thank you in advance for your patience.

There are roughly 7.6 billion people alive on the planet today. 327 million of those people live in the United States. 9 million people live in the state of New Jersey.

In terms of religious makeup, there were, in 2015, 2.3 billion people who identified themselves as Christian, 1.8 billion as Muslim, 1.2 billion as unaffiliated, and 1.1 billion as Hindu. A similar snapshot of the US shows 232 million Christians, 75 million as unaffiliated, and 20 million folks who worship in some other way.

I took those numbers, which are merely numbers, and I wondered what some of the 'most popular' people and things were because I wanted to see what sort of decisions the people represented by those numbers are making.

I discovered that the most popular websites are Google, YouTube, and Facebook. The most downloaded phone apps are Facebook, Facebook Messenger, YouTube, and Instagram. In terms of Facebook, Cristiano Ronaldo (the soccer player) has 122 million likes, the singer Shakira has 104 million, and the actor Vin Diesel has 101 million. The most subscribed to YouTube channels are for a comedic video blogger and commentator who goes by the online name of PewDiePie with 65 million subscribers, a Bollywood site with 58 million subscribers, and Justin Bieber with 40 million. Instagram has the singer

Selena Gomez with 135 million followers, Ronaldo with 123 million, the singer Ariana Grande with 118 million. And just for fun, the most followed in the world of Twitter are the singer Katy Perry with 106 million followers, Justin Bieber with 104 million, and Barak Obama with 101 million (was that the President you thought might show up?).

And yes, there will be a quiz at the conclusion of today's sermon...and it will not be multiple choice!

The reason that I throw all that at you is because when you start to look at these numbers what you see are people, many who profess to be this, that, or the other religious leaning, are making decisions that show their focus is anywhere but of the God whom they profess belief in. Boiling it down further: there are a whole lot of in name only Christians who say they believe and maybe even show some of the religious trappings of belief, but whose belief goes no further than that.

However, I recognize that this message is not necessarily to that particular audience as this is the last Sunday in August and the people who are in church on a day like today, by and large, tend to be the folks who are...rather committed.

But the reality is that each and every one of us struggle with focusing on our faith walk. We make decisions all the time that affect where our thoughts are directed.

Our thoughts are directed toward taking care of our families (which can be as 'simple' as making a meal (which, believe you me, is anything but simple!), to feeling as complicated as trying to figure out all of the pickups and drop-offs for all of the things that the kids are involved in.).

Our thoughts can be directed toward our jobs because for so many work never really stops. It's in our email, it's pinging our phone, it's driving us to do 'one more thing'...until we need to deal with the next thing.

And our thoughts can be directed to the myriad of things that pull for our attention. I know that's a struggle for me as sports, talking about sports, and taking about people talking about sports can become this little world that that begins to seem so large and so important that you become almost unable to think about all the other stuff that should be thought about!

The decisions that we make to focus on this, that, and the other thing help to dictate the world that we create.

Our passages this morning remind us that the struggle to make better decisions, decisions that lead us to a more consistent walk with God (and neighbor), is one that has always been there. The Israelites had walked away so many times and in the Gospel of John we hear how disciples who followed Jesus walked away because their desire to 'know' was greater than their willingness to follow.

I absolutely tie that reality to the fact that we are a sin-filled people.

But that does not mean that it is a hope-less situation. The Scriptures are filled with example after example of how God continues to knock, whisper, leave the 99 in order to remind us, 'I'm right here: come with me...trust me.'

And that will not end. That is who God is.

This also means that we have to fight the good fight and recognize the areas of our life that are pulling us away from God and neighbor to the point that they are becoming the replacement for God and neighbor. Some of the stuff that pulls at us is important (it absolutely is)...lots of stuff that pulls at us is not (and how true do we know that to be).

Now please hear me, this does not mean that all of those things that pull at us, vying for our attention so that we make the decision to choose it, couldn't and even shouldn't be a part of our lives.

Yes, you heard it here first! Your family, your job and your interests are important and need to have a place in your life! If they didn't, then you are neglecting the responsibilities that have been both given to you and you have taken on, in addition to the fact that you wouldn't be using the skills and interests that God has blessed you with. Those things that vie for you to choose them can and even should be a part of your life.

But they need to be an appropriately sized part of your life and not the 800 pound gorilla in the room that limits us because there seems to be little to no other time, energy, or interest.

That's why when we have passages like the ones we have heard this morning, that call for believers to make a stand by making a decision to walk with God, that there are times when people end up saying either through their words or their actions, 'this doesn't work for me.'

The Israelites did it. How many times do we need to hear about how they walked away? Yes, many were able to repent of those missteps and return to God (at the persistent prodding of the Almighty), but the propensity to wander is one of the threads of the story of faith that we are shown throughout the Hebrew Scriptures.

We heard explicitly how there were those who were walking with Jesus who did it. Again, these are people who had been present for his teaching and at least one of his signs, his miracles (the feeding of the 5000), and instead of listening to the voice that called for them to follow on faith (which is what we hear through the voice of Peter), they walk away because they are not able to come to a place where what Jesus is saying is able to fit into the worldly wisdom that they possess.

They turned away because walking with God didn't fit into the structure that they felt comfortable with...and the reality is that moving and shifting your life so that you walk with God is going to feel uncomfortable...until it becomes absolutely necessary.

Day by day.

Hour by hour.

Minute by minute.

The decisions that we make, the voices that we listen to, will either empower our walk with the Lord...or impede it as those choices lead to other choices that lead to other choices that lead us further and further away. Those numbers that we talked about at the top are illustrative examples of the fact that people, including a whole lot of individuals who profess to be Christian, who are willing to follow all sorts of things. None of those things, necessarily, are inherently bad...but too often the voices of, 'it's okay', and 'don't worry about it' lead us to make another decision and another decision and another

decision, until we end up finding ourselves wondering where God went...when it was really our decision that led us to close our eyes to Him all along.

Every day we make decisions and those decisions affect our walk with God. This minute, which can lead to this hour, which can lead to this day, choose to stand with God. Allow that decision to affect the ones that will inevitably follow.

Decide...and then decide again...and then decide again. Each decision to stay will God will empower your walk with God.

After Sermon Prayer

Holy and gracious God, we make decisions every day and many of those decisions find us following voices that, while not necessarily bad, are not of You. Lord, help us to decide to follow You this minute...just this minute...so that we might begin to feel that reorientation of a life that walks with You. Minute by minute until we know we need no other way. In Jesus name we do pray. Amen.