

TO WHOM CAN WE GO?

JOHN 6: 56-59

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He was an old man who had possibly, probably, lived too long—or at least a lot longer than to be of much use to anyone or to be able to contribute anything significant to anyone else’s life. He had always been active, a hard worker, a very complicated man who did not spend a lot of time examining his own complexities or reflecting on his motives. He had grown up in a devout Methodist home, had married a preacher’s daughter and they had raised three sons in a faithful, church-going home. While, he, the old man, did not care much for preachers and even less for their sermons, he had tried to live a simple, Christian life of doing what he knew was right, helping others as much as he could and relying on God’s grace. When he died, we gathered at his graveside on a cold, windswept, rainy day. Just family and two friends. That was all who were left. In our last conversation, he and I had talked about regrets and forgiveness and the hope of heaven. When I told his other two sons about that last conversation, they didn’t believe me. “Dad never talked about that kind of stuff,” they said. “You’re making that up.”

She was a bright, young high school graduate who came to the city because, as Dorothy says to Toto in *The Wizard of Oz*, “I don’t think this is Kansas.” In her eagerness to get away from her small town upbringing and her attenuated Baptist faith, she lived a profligate, undisciplined, emotionally draining existence for a number of years. In her desperation to be loved, to find someone who could look past the ordinariness into the rampant beauty under the skin, she relied for a while on an older man. She gave up family and friends and any sociability she knew for him. Gave him everything, including her savings. Everything. But one night when she was praying desperately, she heard what sounded certainly like a voice, saying, “Do what you know is right. You have lots of hope and many years ahead. Do not surrender.” She chucked the guy and came to a downtown Chicago church because it was the only church she knew about, the one her pastor back in Kansas had advised her to seek out.

He had suffered a series of disappointments in every church he had served. While he had a passion for ministry and felt called to God’s work, he had never enjoyed much success as a pastor. Every call ended in rancor and disappointment. Then he met with the search committee of a struggling, neighborhood Chicago congregation, and although they liked him, both he and they had serious reservations about the possibilities. But because they didn’t have much money to offer for salary and benefits and he didn’t have much of a resume, they sort of agreed to try to make the new pastorate work. The chair of the search committee told him that the congregation offered a “challenge.” Well, he had been in the business long enough to know that when someone uses the word “challenge” you had either better duck or leave the room. But he thought, “I can handle this. No church is irredeemable. God will lead me. I will rely on the Holy Spirit.” And he had, and the church turned around, moved from its narcissistic, self-centered, closed-minded past into a bright new future with openness and possibility. And by the

time my friend, the pastor, after many failures and too many disappointments, died too young of cancer, he had lived by a newfound hope in God's purposes. His favorite poem had become Emily Dickinson's Number 254:

*"Hope is that thing with feathers—
That perches in the soul—
And sings the tune without the words—
And never stops—at all."*

Every one of us lives in that land between the already and the not yet. The past impinges, molds, determines our lives in so many ways. Hope is an intrinsic part of existence in Christ. As St. Paul says in his first letter to the Corinthians, "Now we know only in part." Hope, after all, has a built-in element of realization. "Hope that is seen," the apostle writes, "is not hope."

This long discourse on the Bread of Life, which we have been reading as the Gospel lection for the past five weeks, is set near Passover and is built on the double miracle of the feeding of the five thousand and Jesus' walking on the lake. The first miracle is reminiscent of the significance of bread in the Exodus story and in the reliving of that story in the annual Passover Seder. The story of Jesus walking on the water points to the mystery of his divine origin. He is not just Messiah (John 6: 14-15) but much, much more: he is the Word of God incarnate (John 1: 14). Jesus is the bread of heaven who offers eternal life; Christ's body and blood recall the Eucharistic meal; his relationship with God is highlighted; and many now turn away from Jesus' teaching.

But now a new element is introduced when Jesus presses his closest disciples to decide if they also wish to turn away from following him. The emphasis now is turned on our response-ability in choosing to follow Jesus. Both God's initiative and our response are essential to Christian discipleship.

First, the message itself is strange. Eat his body? Drink his blood? With just a few words, Jesus manages to offend other Jews and alienate almost everybody else who is listening. He gathers great crowds around him, but little by little, as they listen to his message, the people turn away until only a few of his closest disciples remain.

Second, Peter's confession comes when Jesus asks, "Do you also wish to go away?" Peter answers, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life." We can interpret this as either an expression of despair or an act of exultation. Where else do we have to go? Well, like us, Peter and his friends had many other places where they could have turned. Family commitments, the comforts of home, jobs, the search for social status. There is always another dollar to be earned, another purchase to be made, another relationship to explore, another position to pursue, another enemy to withstand, another grief to mourn, another country to explore.

Margot Livesey wrote a novel, *The Missing World*, that begins on a tantalizing note when its protagonist, Hazel Ransome, is struck by a car in London and loses her memory, but only for the three years

immediately preceding the accident. During that period, she had broken up with her boyfriend, who now takes Hazel's amnesia as an opportunity to pretend that he never betrayed her. The novel is filled with characters who are led into an intricate story about the elusiveness of memory.

Ms. Livesey circles Santayana's dictum that "those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it" and its correlative, "only forgetfulness sets us free." In an interview in the New York Times, Ms. Livesey said that she immersed herself in St. Augustine who set up the idea that memory is the great storehouse and that nothing is ever lost. What really struck me about the interview was Ms. Livesey's statement that "I am the opposite of Edith Piaf. I regret everything. There are so many things that I would like to do over." Oh, goodness: that's me! I call myself a connoisseur of regret. I am convinced of the virtues of amnesia. That may be why my favorite passage of Scripture is from Paul's letter to the Philippians: "Forgetting those things which are behind, I press on toward the goal of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3:14).

It is of great importance that every congregation has some sane, reasonable, mature person who will not get bogged down in all the perpetual pettiness and in-fighting of the church and who will stand up in our midst and say, "God is..." and go on to complete the sentence. Or, "Jesus tells us..." There are tendencies within us and forces outside us that relentlessly reduce the faith to a checklist of explanations or a handbook of moral precepts or an economic arrangement or political expediency or a pleasure boat. In such a theology, God is reduced to what can be measured, used, weighed, controlled or felt.

The Reverend O. L. Peek was my pastor during my last two years of high school. (I never knew why all my pastors only had initials—T. O. Prewitt, W. A. Tyson, O. L. Peek. I never knew their real names. I wondered if only having initials was a requirement for being called to ministry.) The Reverend Peek was trying to convince me that God was calling me to ministry while I believed that I had no talent for the church (after all these years, I believe I was right and he was wrong) and I thought the only gifts I had lay in coaching football (which is the one time I have enjoyed unequalled success in my career). So, one day he gave me a huge tome of a book, a very precious volume from his personal library, a book for which he had paid an enormous sum of money on a poor Methodist preacher's salary. He was making in those days probably \$3,600 a year, so the gift meant sacrifice. Moreover, the Reverend Peek was thoroughly despised by most of the members of First Methodist Church in Pawhuska, Oklahoma, a place where a free pulpit was not highly prized.

The book's portentous title was *Systematic Theology*, and the first, very long chapter began, as all such books should, I suppose, with a chapter concerning God. But the problem with that chapter's approach was that it was going to prove God by listing God's attributes. I knew immediately that such an approach would never prove God. Categories like omnipotence and omniscience and omni-presence simply do not cut it. At least for me. They did not prove God's existence. You cannot prove God by making a list.

Peter knew what he had found. In the following of Jesus, he had discovered that Jesus was truly the Holy One of God, that Jesus alone possessed the words of eternal life. Sometimes the last choice is the best choice—it just takes a while to see it. Our commitment does not depend on any particular creed or

mission statement or style of worship. It is our professed willingness to follow Jesus Christ that unites us as a community of faith.

Luther's acid test of the Christian pastor was, "Does he know of death and the Devil? Or is he all sweetness and light?" The test applies to lay people as well. Life, as we all know, is not just about goodness and happiness. It's about evil and demise and depression and destruction. The only way we can live is to give ourselves to the One who offers a hope the world can neither know nor grant.

For all of St. John's periphrastics about the bread and blood, the body and eating the flesh, Jesus makes the call Specific, Attainable and Measurable. Do you remember those three concepts from your community organizer training? They are important for the church. The SAM test stands in judgment on all those high-falutin' goals churches typically set. "We will save Hyde Park for Christ" or "We will let everyone in Hyde Park, Kenwood and Woodlawn know what a great church we have" or "We will tell the Good News of Christ to our community." How will we know we have succeeded—or whether or not we have failed? I ask. So the call of Christ is to us, and it is Specific, Attainable and Measurable.

Let me tell you a story about a call that is Specific, Attainable, and Measurable.

W. H. Lax was a Methodist pastor in London's West End in the nineteenth century when that area of the British capital was a slum. Brother Lax, as everyone called him, was a wonderful, caring clergyman who ministered faithfully to God's last, lost and least.

One day when he entered the butcher's shop where he bought the meat for his table, the proprietor told him, "Brother Lax, there is an old man up on the fourth floor who is very ill. He scorns all things religious, but I wonder if you would go up and see if you can help him?"

Brother Lax trudged up the four flights of stairs to visit the very sick old man. When he tried to have prayer or read Scripture, the old man turned his head to the wall. On his way down, Brother Lax stopped in the butcher shop and told the proprietor, "Cook up some pork chops and send them up to the man. I will pay you for them when I return."

A couple of weeks later, the minister returned. The scenario was not quite as dismal. The old man was a bit more receptive to the Gospel. Lax was able to have prayer with him. Again, on his way down, he ordered some pork chops to be sent up to the old man.

When Brother Lax returned a third time, the old man listened to Scripture, talked with him about his needs and allowed him to pray. The routine continued: pork chops were sent up and Lax paid for them.

Then, after making a trip to the Lake District for a few weeks, Brother Lax returned to the West End. He stopped in at the butcher shop. The proprietor told him, "The old man died while you were gone. But he told me to tell you that he found Christ as his personal savior. He died knowing that he was going to be with God and he also wanted you to know that it wasn't your prayers, it wasn't reading Scripture with him that saved him. It was the pork chops."

You and I live in between God's will and our own wills. When we surrender our wills to God, when we put our trust in God's providence and grace and when we offer hope to others, we turn to the One who has the words of eternal life. To whom else can we go?