

Sunday, August 26, 2012: John 6:56-69

by [Wallace W. Bubar](#) in the [August 22, 2012](#) issue

What was Jesus thinking? He had such a great following before he spoke. He'd just fed 5,000 people, and they were ready to sign up to become disciples. This would've been the time to use his best preaching material—toss out a few Beatitudes, or tell a couple of stories about farmers or sheep. Jesus could have had the biggest church in town.

But instead he launched into a ridiculously long, convoluted discourse about eating his flesh and drinking his blood, which—let's face it—sounds creepy. And when he was confronted by raised eyebrows and expressions of bewilderment and a barrage of questions, Jesus didn't let up but just kept getting more and more obscure.

No wonder his followers started grumbling: "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?" Many turned away and went home, never to be seen again.

And Jesus let them go! He let them just wander off and made no attempt to stop them. He didn't say, "Hey, hold on a second! Let me break it down for you." He didn't offer a *Jesus for Dummies* version of things. Instead he made things difficult. He left his followers with their questions unanswered, apparently preferring to let them go off and wrestle with those questions rather than give them easy answers or a user-friendly faith.

About a dozen folks attend a weekly Bible study group at our church. No matter what passage we're studying, we always seem to come around to the same questions, usually raised by the same people. Suzy: "Are we supposed to understand this literally or metaphorically?" Margaret: "If God did all that back then, how come he doesn't answer my prayers today?" Donya: "How can we really be sure that any of this is true, anyway?" Dick: "And why is there suffering in the world?"

These are the questions that won't go away. The unanswerable questions. We talk about them at length but never come to any satisfying conclusions. I would love to be able to say, "Here is the answer for you," instead of admitting, "Here is an insoluble paradox you will wrestle with for the rest of your life."

Honestly, it's a wonder Jesus had any followers left. Maybe the real miracle in the sixth chapter of John wasn't that 5,000 people were fed at the beginning, but that a dozen were still left at the end.

When Jesus saw the crowds deserting him, he asked the twelve if they too wished to go away. He understood that following him was no picnic and that they might want to opt out like everyone else. But that's when Peter spoke up: "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life."

Some people hear in that a bold, unwavering declaration of faith, like Joshua in the Old Testament who confidently proclaimed, "But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord!" Maybe that's how Peter said it.

But I've always detected in Peter's words a little hint of exasperation, almost as if he were shrugging his shoulders, throwing his arms up in the air and exclaiming something like: "Look, we don't understand you either, Jesus. We don't get you any better than any of the others did. But what other choice do we have? Where else can we go?"

His is a declaration of faith in an ambiguous world like ours and for people like us, who don't understand everything about Jesus and have plenty of unanswered questions, but keep hanging in there with him anyway. There are other options for pursuing spiritual enlightenment, to be sure. We could be dabbling in the Kabbalah or reading Deepak Chopra. Yet we keep coming back to Jesus, maybe because in his words—however perplexing—we've heard something that rings true. Maybe it's because whenever we're in his presence—however mysterious—we feel more alive than we do elsewhere. Something about Jesus keeps bringing us back.

I was meeting with a newcomer to our church. He'd gone through the new member class but was reluctant to join. He'd been a Unitarian. He'd read Dan Brown, Bart Ehrman and Sam Harris. He wasn't sure if he was a skeptic, a seeker or an agnostic, but he was pretty sure he was not a Presbyterian. He asked me a host of questions about the creeds, other religions, the relationship between faith and science and what it means to believe in Jesus. He nodded politely when I tried to formulate answers to each question, but I could tell I wasn't persuading him. In the end he said, "Thanks. I appreciate your time, but I just don't think this is for me." We shook hands and parted.

The next Sunday, guess who I saw slip quietly into the back of the church? He took his place in the pews, then stood and sang the hymns along with everyone else. He didn't join in the creed, I noticed. But when it was time for communion, he came shuffling down the aisle. I wanted to ask if he'd had some epiphany since our last conversation, but I didn't. Instead I said, "The body of Christ, given for you," and placed it into his hand. What is someone like that doing in church week in and week out? What is anyone doing there?

After the service, I greeted him and said, "Hey, I didn't expect to be seeing you again." He smiled and shrugged, the way I imagine Peter shrugged.

Lord, to whom can we go? Where else can we turn?