

Choosing to abide (John 6:56-69)

This last reading from the bread of life discourse places Jesus' disciples at a crossroads.

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One August years ago I saw a great commercial. A father makes his way merrily down the aisles of an office supply store while his sullen children trod behind him. As he skips, he fills the cart with school supplies: folders and pencils, erasers and pens, paper. In the background plays a familiar refrain: "It's the most wonderful time of the year!" The back-to-school season is upon us.

Times have changed. While I feel the same joy as that televised father as my children begin school, I don't have to make the same choices between school supplies as the man in the commercial. Gone are the days of hunting down paper and pencils. I did not search the circulars for coupons for compasses. Nary a ruler or calculator crossed my path. I simply wrote a check to the PTA and the items were delivered to our home.

But there are still choices to make. Students have to make choices at school, academic, social, and otherwise. Adults face decisions about budgets and commitments, about the balance of work and family and leisure. The church itself will offer an array of opportunities for study and enrichment, for worship and service. And before we make such choices, we would do well to hear the call of the gospel.

This last reading from the bread of life discourse places Jesus' disciples at a crossroads. This has been a hard slog for Jesus' original audience, as it has been for

lectionary preachers. The previous selection highlighted the people's disgruntled response. Now things are getting more personal. Jesus' own disciples complain, "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?" They have to choose whether to follow, and so do we.

It isn't easy. Making the choice for God and all God offers is the commitment not of an hour or a day but a lifetime. When parents bring their child to the waters of baptism, when a confirmand makes her promise before God and family, when an individual joins the church—I remind them that faith won't be easy. Jesus tells the people that to believe in him, to trust in him, means they must "abide" in him, they must stay. It's a hard path to follow. Many lose their way.

John's Gospel is clear: "Many of Jesus' disciples turned back and no longer went about with him." Even people among those who originally chose discipleship changed their minds. Which goes to show that making the choice for God isn't just something we can do once. We must do it every day, our whole life long. We must abide.

Anything worthwhile requires abiding. An alcoholic in recovery can't have just one drink. In marriage a couple pledges to remain together "for better or worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health." New high school graduates admitted to college have to keep studying to keep their scholarships. Athletes train hard, often year-round, to stay in the game.

And no matter what our goals are, no matter how sincere we are in our promises to ourselves or others, most of us will make a mistake. Sometimes that failure cannot be overcome. When it comes to faith, however, making the wrong choice is not the end of the story. Not according to this gospel reading.

As Jesus looks out over his disciples he admits that following him, leading a life of faith, ultimately isn't really our choice at all. He says, "no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father." Our decision for God is superseded by God's decision for us. Peter puts it plainly: "Lord, to whom can we go?" There is no other choice.

In "The Love of God and Affliction," Simone Weil asserts that humanity once was able to walk away from God, but Jesus' crucifixion changes everything: "As for us, we are nailed in place, free only to direct our gaze." We can choose to look up at Jesus or away—to accept or reject the challenge and the promise of the cross and

what Peter calls the “words of eternal life” that are always calling to us.

What might our lives look like if we claimed this promise? What if we chose to abide in Jesus? What if we were no longer afraid of difficult teachings? Would we associate with different people? Would we do different things with our time? Would we spend our money in a different way? Would we treat a spouse, a child, or a neighbor, a teammate or classmate with more dignity and grace? Might we look at ourselves anew?

Fall could be the most wonderful time of the year for children and adults alike. We get to make the choice.