

The Long Haul **John 6:56-58, 60-69**

Slide: Out of Order

Imagine the following scenarios and see if you can relate at all:

Tom and Amy are sitting in traffic on the way to Chicago. It is stupidly rush hour when they had to travel by car and they are going at a snail's pace to get to their location. While sitting there, going from poll station to poll station, Amy reads a sign that says something like "road construction - down to one lane ahead" and she can't even see where that one lane is yet. She becomes frustrated and irritated and she is not even the one driving. Tom says, "Will we ever get there? This is not how I wanted to spend my day."

Janice has a relative she cares deeply about, who is very ill. It would be one thing if she could be there to help, but she is a couple thousand miles away. She is waiting to hear about some results from testing but the waiting is frustrating and has been a very long process. It's agonizing to watch her loved one in pain with no way of doing anything about it. It's beyond frustration and discouragement as they wait.

Fred is watching the news and Afghanistan just fell to the Taliban. The recent ICCP report just came out and he reads that our climate is in dire need of attention

and action. Delta is at a concerning level of spread in his community and in the United States. And it's frustrating and disparaging to see how people are treating each other, even in his little community of only 3,000 people. He's frustrated, disappointed in people and wants to give up.

And, I'm sure you all understand some or all of these little story vignettes. Isn't frustration frustrating? Aren't there some really huge hurdles to manage right now? Haven't you been there? Can't you relate to some degree being in consternation, frustration, or exasperation? Work, home, relationships, Delta, daily life, even trips that you hope will be without incident or cancelation, frustration seems to be as common as other negative feelings. Add to it the frustration that can occur in the nation and the world, and you have people who might find themselves stuck in the spiral of exasperation, which of course never leads to anything positive or useful.

Slide: Hard Sayings

Now that we are all in the place of frustration, which was really what I was going for, put yourselves into the Gospel reading from John chapter six. The crowd who has been following Jesus and even the disciples of Jesus are frustrated. They are frustrated and they are frustrated at Jesus. Some are so frustrated at what Jesus asks of

them, that they leave. Even some of the disciples leave for good. They cannot follow such a difficult path because they are pushed beyond their understanding of faith, pushed beyond their willingness. Jesus wants everything from them, their time, way of life, belief, and faith, something that can be frustrating to do and if not that, certainly difficult to do. Such a following, Jesus says, seems to not be for everyone. Some will stick it in for the long haul, while the others just look for another leader they like that suits their ideas. Maybe they will find another Messiah who isn't talking about doing this impossible sounding thing.

Think of frustration and then apply it to your own faith life. Has something ever happened to you in your life that it became difficult to continue to believe in Christ? Have you ever been ill or betrayed, or have you experienced hardship, loss of a friend or relative? Having faith can be frustrating when we expect that there should be results from that faith, tangible results, not hidden, results we feel should be there.

And, we may wonder, shouldn't the teaching of Jesus be something we can understand and apply in our lives? Yet, often, as people of faith, we know the path we ought to take, to worship, to pray, to keep the commandments and designate daily devotion to God while being in service to our neighbor. Quite frankly, with

everything else going on, that's hard. Following Jesus *is* frustrating, because the teaching of Jesus is a hard teaching, so much so that many just don't follow him, or like those followers, they simply look for something else that suits their tastes.

Something of this frustration seems to be happening to the people who were following Jesus at the time he walked among us as the human one. As you may remember, we have been following this whole chapter for the last several weeks. The story begins when Jesus feeds five thousand people with five barley loaves and two fish. This amazed the crowd so much that they began to say, "Surely this is the Prophet who is come into the world." But, Jesus, knowing that they intended to make him a King, disappears from the crowd.

Then, he crossed the lake with his disciples to Capernaum where the crowd found him again, and asked him "What sign will you give us that we may see it and believe you?" They were speaking of the manna that God gave the Israelites when they needed food, but Jesus again challenges them by saying that he was the sign from God. He was the bread of from Heaven. He, Jesus, was the one who was offering him as true food for them.

This of course pushed the limits of their faith. It pushed them to further frustration because they thought, "how can he give us

himself to eat?" Their literalism disengaged their ability to follow Jesus. Furthermore, Jesus continued to push them harder until we get to the reading today, when Jesus finally asks them to make a commitment to this hard teaching. Believe in me or don't believe in me, Jesus says, but make a choice. For some, the frustration was far too acute for them, so much so that they just left, even some of them being disciples of Jesus.

Then, in the moment of the highest frustration, when it seems like even the twelve disciples may throw in the towel so to speak, Peter, the one who later denies Jesus, who is often depicted as blustery, stubborn, and difficult, proclaims one of the most incredible declarations of faith. We sometimes sing it in our liturgy before the Gospel: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life! We have come to have faith and know that you are the Holy one of God."

Let me paraphrase this for you. Peter is basically saying this: "Lord, who else can we go to? Where else *can* we go? What else can we do? You are the only one who can save us because we have come to believe and know that you are the divine One from God." In his greatest moment of frustration comes Peter's greatest moment of faith. That moment pushes him into the long haul, even as frustrating

and hard as it can be along with its joys.

Slide: Do or do not.

He realizes that no matter how hard the teaching of Jesus is, no matter how little we understand, and no matter if things go our way or don't, we trust that the person of Jesus Christ, the son of the living God, will sustain us and walk with us to create a world that more resembles God's goodness while also promised life eternal. We cannot save ourselves. We cannot turn to anything else for our salvation, not our politics, our families, not our country, because all those things eventually fade, but only in Christ alone, because ultimately when everything else fails us, Jesus won't. Christ is the only one to whom we *can* go.

Some years ago, I read the book *Amazing Grace* by Kathleen Norris, who is a spiritual writer. She wrote in the preface of that book about making a presentation to a group of skeptics, who judged the church to be abusive and patriarchal. Now, she doesn't deny in her book that the church has struggled with abuse and patriarchy. But, for her, who originally was an agnostic, her stumbling into a church one day found her facing Jesus and she couldn't resist the pull of God.

But, at the end of her presentation, a woman from the audience asked Kathleen Norris this:

“I don’t mean to be offensive, but I just don’t understand how you can get so much *comfort* from a religion whose language does so much harm.”

At first, Kathleen Norris was taken aback as she states in her book, but then she has a sudden understanding of the woman’s frustration. The woman was focused upon the word *comfort* as if that is *comfort* is the primary part of our faith – to be comforted. Kathleen Norris noted in her book, “I said that I didn’t think it was *comfort* I was seeking or *comfort* that I’d found. As far as I’m concerned, this religion has saved my life and my husband’s life...So it’s not *comfort* that I’m talking about but redemption.”

Slide: Life in Christ...

As we heard in the Gospel lesson today, Peter shows us this same reality. Jesus does comfort us, but *comfort* is not the only attribute of who God is, at least for us. Within our faith, there are hard teachings, difficult paths, and this journey in faith is a long haul religion, one that takes effort, discipleship, and is sometimes uncomfortable to do the right thing. I know that for me right now, it’s been very uncomfortable doing the right thing for the neighbor all the time, every day, every second when it comes to this virus we live with.

Jesus calls disciples to follow some very hard ways. Yet, in all

that, Jesus also sends us ways to be comforted. He can frustrate us, too, to the point of salvation, to the point that we can do no other but turn to him within that discomfort and exasperation and make a commitment, even when we are tempted to “turn back and no longer follow him.”

But, when we do turn to Christ, the one who speaks these hard words, words we often don’t understand, we recognize that through his death and resurrection, we have no ordinary teacher, but rather the Holy one of God. We encounter God, whose words and teachings are not always comforting words, but they are saving words.

When Jesus says, “whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood”, he offers himself as salvation. At the Eucharistic table, here, today, even at a time of great frustration, even when we want to give up on our faith, Christ invites us. And, when we become frustrated, discouraged, and exasperated, we exclaim as Peter once did:

“Lord, to whom can we go? You have the way to eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy one of God.”

In the long haul, Christ will never leave us, even and especially when we do the hard things. Let us encourage each other to do these hard things in faith together. Amen.