**August 23, 2015 – 13th Sunday after Pentecost**

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Well, at last we come to the end of our five weeks of bread. We’ve heard about bread given out to the five thousand, bread as compared to manna in the wilderness, bread of life, bread come down from heaven, Jesus as the living bread, and finally bread equaling Jesus’ flesh.

You may have noticed that the first couple of verses of this week’s Gospel are the same as the last verses of last week’s. This is on purpose, because if those verses weren’t there, this final passage wouldn’t seem to be about bread at all. As it is, it helps us to understand what this whole chapter is really about, which is our relationship with God through Jesus. But this final passage in the series shows another side of relationship – the shadow side of rejection and betrayal.

This whole chapter, and actually, the entire Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, is the story of God’s relationship with us, our continued rejection of that relationship, and God’s faithfulness in not giving up on us. The repeated references to the manna in the wilderness aren’t just about food, but about God reaching past our anger and stubbornness time after time to provide for our needs.

The truth is, relationships are hard. And sometimes it can seem like a relationship with God is hard – hard to figure out, hard to be faithful to, just plain hard. The disciples voice what we all may have thought from time to time after Jesus tells them, “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me.”

Their response is, “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?” Here the NRSV translation is not exactly wrong, but it’s kind of mushy. The word for difficult – *skleros* in Greek – is more commonly translated as hard, violent, harsh, or stern. It’s not just difficult, it’s really, really tough to take. The other phrase that the NRSV sort of softens is “who can accept it?” The more accurate translation would be, “who is able to hear it, or who is able to listen to it?”

Jesus words are being perceived as so harsh that people are wondering out loud, as is made clear in the next sentence, if they can even listen to him anymore. But what is he saying that’s so hard to hear?

Well, we could go for the obvious low hanging fruit – Jesus talking about eating flesh and drinking blood. Taken literally, that would be tremendously offensive to Jewish people. Leviticus 17:10, as part of Jewish law, prohibits drinking blood of any kind, and in Jewish tradition the dead are treated with great respect. So to say that Jesus’ disciples would be offended by such talk would be the easy way out. And a very short sermon.

But that doesn’t seem to be what Jesus is referring to when he says, “Does this offend you?” The word translated as “offend” is skandalidzó. A more common meaning than to offend is to cause to stumble or to cause to sin, as in the verse, “if your right eye offends you, pluck it out.”

Again we have to ask, what was it that Jesus was saying that might cause people to stumble or sin? That seems kind of counterintuitive, at best. But what if the “this” in that sentence refers not just to the last few verses, but to all of Jesus’ message in chapter 6.

So let’s review. Jesus miraculously feeds a huge crowd of people. They follow him around hoping for another handout, but he tells them that there is another kind of bread that won’t just keep them alive for a day, but eternally. Then he tells them that HE is that bread, and has come down from heaven. Then he tells them that his own flesh is the bread that they must eat to live, unlike their ancestors, who died.

And many of them start thinking, “All I wanted was a bit of a nosh, and now this guy is talking all crazy. I can’t buy that – I’m outta here!” Jesus is saying that this relationship with God is more complicated than they might think, and they respond with, “That’s just too much to ask.”

As I said, relationships, TRUE relationships are hard. They involve work. I’m sure you’ve heard the old saying, “Good marriages aren’t 50-50, they’re 100-100.” That’s the kind of relationship Jesus is talking about here, and it came as a shock to his followers, just as it sometimes does to us.

Being in a relationship with Jesus means giving up a lot of things that are really fun to do. Oh, not the drinking and dancing that some people think are sinful, but things like worrying, holding grudges, being resentful, even hating.

And relationship with Jesus means having faith that God has our best interests at heart, and trusting in his love for us. A relationship with Jesus means letting love, not fear, rule our lives.

A relationship with Jesus, like any relationship, means two-way communication – talking and listening. It means talking to him when you’re mad or sad or glad or even bad. And it means listening even when you’re far too busy or frantic or distracted or tired.

A relationship with Jesus means being vulnerable and letting go of the control that we think we have over our own lives, in order to accept the life and grace that is freely and lovingly offered.

Maybe, ultimately, that was what was so hard for those followers who left to accept. Because to accept the gift of eternal life, you have to acknowledge that you can’t do anything to deserve it, but are being offered it anyway. Maybe it’s easier just to say, I don’t need it – I’m fine just as I am. I’m in control of my life and I don’t need God.

The last couple of verses are some of the most touching in the entire Gospel. Jesus sadly asks the twelve apostles if they also want to leave him and Peter speaks up at once, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.”

But the chapter doesn’t end there, although it would be nice if it did. The last two verses are:

*Jesus answered them, “Did I not choose you, the twelve? Yet one of you is a devil.” He was speaking of Judas son of Simon Iscariot, for he, though one of the twelve, was going to betray him.*

Jesus knows that Judas will betray him, just as he knows that Peter will deny him three times. Just as he knows that every one of us will let him down, probably more than once, and will betray this most precious relationship. Yet, he doesn’t cast them off and he doesn’t cast us off either. God didn’t cast off the Israelites although time and time again they turned their backs on him and lost their faith. And God won’t leave us either, no matter how many times we fall short.

*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.*

That’s not in Chapter 6, of course. But it’s behind it. It’s behind the whole Gospel. Jesus, the bread of eternal life, the bread that came down from heaven, did so because God so loved the world. God so loved every one of us that he became one of us in order to share his eternal life with us. In order that we could be in a relationship with God. But though God has chosen us, the choice to enter this relationship is, as usual, entirely up to us.

Amen.