

Questions for Lent

#4 Do You Wish To Go Away?

John 6: 60-71

Bubba Smith got married not too long ago. He and his new bride honeymooned at the Watergate Hotel in Washington, D.C. His new bride was concerned. **"What if the place is still bugged?"** she asked.

Bubba said, **"I'll look for a bug"**. He looked behind the drapes, behind the pictures, under the rug. **"AHA!"** Under the rug on the floor was a disc with four screws. He got out his leatherman tool, unscrewed the screws, and threw them and the disc out the window.

The next morning, the hotel manager asked Bubba, **"How was your room? How was the service? How was your stay at the Watergate Hotel?"**

Bubba said, **"Why are you asking me all of these questions?"**

The hotel manager said, **"Well, it was a strange night. The room under you complained of the chandelier falling on them!"** That has nothing to do with the sermon. I just thought it was funny.

Our Scripture lesson today began ***"On hearing it, many of his disciples said, "This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?"*** To understand the teaching, we need to look back a bit in our bibles to get the context that this teaching was set in.

Earlier in this sixth chapter of John's Gospel, Jesus had been telling His followers who He was. He had fed the multitude by multiplying the loaves and the fishes and the crowds had followed Him. Then Jesus became rather harsh. He turned to the crowd and said: ***"I tell you the truth, you are looking for me, not because you saw miraculous signs but because you ate the loaves and had your fill"***. [John 6: 26 NIV]

Then there followed a dialogue about signs. The disciples asked him, ***"What miraculous sign then will you give that we may see it and believe you? What will you do?"*** [John6: 30 NIV] His followers recalled that Moses had given the Israelites in the wilderness the sign of manna. Jesus reminded them that it was not Moses who gave the bread, but the Father who gives the true bread from Heaven. ***"Sir," they said, "from now on give us this bread"***. [John 6: 34 NIV]

Later Jesus made this amazing claim: ***"I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world."*** [John 6:51 NIV]

The discussion continued -- all centering on the image of the bread and the manna in the wilderness. Jesus closed that discussion, saying,

“Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him.” [John 6:54-56 NIV]

Is it any wonder that the crowd found those words hard to accept -- hard to believe? He was claiming that He was God come down from Heaven. If anyone was going to have eternal life, they were going to have to accept and submit to Jesus.

The call to discipleship was a difficult call, a call that demanded making Jesus Christ the number one priority of your life. John’s Gospel tells us: [John 6:66 NIV] ***“From this time, many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him.*** It was then that Jesus often did. He called his inner circle together to consider their own commitment. He asked them the question that we are considering today: ***“Do you also wish to go away?”*** [KJV] Alternatively, as the NIV translates this passage, ***“You do not want to leave too, do you?”***

It's the discipleship question -- a question that Jesus not only asked of His twelve disciples, but a question He asks of us today.

I. Let’s pursue that question by considering first, THE TEMPTATION TO GO AWAY.

Some of us have been discipleship dropouts. All of us see those around us who have dropped out. They once followed Jesus; they once knew a meaningful life in this community of faith, but not any longer. Something happened that pulled them away. I heard a preacher say recently that about one-third of the members of his church stood behind everything the Church did; **about two-thirds of them just stood behind.**

Let's think about this in very practical terms in our own congregation. Some folks have dropped out of our church because they say our church is too LIBERAL in its mind-set and style. This is often brought about by the public pronouncements of various individuals, boards and agencies associated with the United Methodist Church.

My hunch is that this is more an excuse than a reason. That's the reason it is absolutely critical, that we involve people who join our church in fellowship, in ministry, and in the study of our biblical and our doctrinal values. Recent statistics tell us that unless a new member of a congregation makes seven new friends within the first six months they’ve joined the church, they will drop out.

Others may be tempted to drop out of the church because our church is too involved in SOCIAL (read that political) issues. All of us need to think about that, and to think clearly. Jesus calls us to be involved with people where they are. And if we are going to follow our Master, we're going to have to go with Him into a lot of places we might not want to go, and be involved in issues that we are not comfortable.

Still others say they have problems with the church because our church talks too much about MONEY. A friend sent me a cartoon recently. Two men were standing out in front of a church. The strange thing about it was that they were both dressed only in their underwear. One of them says to the other, **"That's the most effective sermon on money I've ever heard"**.

I keep a close tab on my sermon subjects. I've never preached an entire sermon on money more than ONCE in any year. The truth is, I probably talk about money too little. Jesus talked about it as much as He talked about anything else, and much more than He talked about sins. Jesus knew that where our money is, there our heart would be also.

Moving from that kind of practical look at it, let me mention quickly two big general reasons people become what I call discipleship drop outs.

The first reason is the uniqueness of Jesus' claims. The second reason they drop out is what I call crowd mentality

a) Jesus claimed to be the bread of life – that is he claimed to be the source of any meaning that any of us are ever going to have in this life. Some folks simply can't go along with that, and they certainly can't follow along when He begins to make those hard claims on our life -- claims about denying ourselves, giving unto the least of these, taking up a cross, becoming humble, living clean and holy lives. That teaching tempts some people to drop out.

b) Then there is what I call crowd mentality. There are those who simply can't resist the crowd. If the people who surround them are going in a particular direction that is against Christ and His Church, they find it very hard to swim upstream.

WARNING: No matter where YOU are in your discipleship, the temptation to leave the cause of Christ is very real.

II. That brings us to Peter's response to Jesus' question, *"Lord, to whom shall we go?"* [John 6: 68 NIV]

I can imagine that tears came into Peter's eyes as he shifted nervously from one foot to the other. Stark terror struck deep in his breast, the kind he had never experienced before. His soul went stone cold with fear as he spoke the minds of the other eleven: ***"Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life."*** [John 6: 68 NIV]

Others have left suddenly, but Peter was determined. Therefore, that is one essential mark of discipleship -- determination.

Determination is essential for discipleship.

III But it takes more than determination to be disciples. Our determination must be fed by discipline.

Harry Stack Sullivan gives us an indicator for discipline. He uses the designation, "selectively inattention". He says this is the way people protect themselves from anything that threatens their sense of security. They simply give it no attention. My mother, for example, bless her soul never asked questions that she didn't want to hear the answer to. Now this may become a bad practice if it becomes a habitual pattern that prohibits us from trying new or uncertain things.

Yet, there is a sense in which this can be a positive aspect of discipline. Discipline, however, requires not only that we be selectively inattentive, it requires that we be selectively attentive. In these days of basketball fever, the sport or the personalities in the sport informs us that Discipline is a key. One of the best coaches in the game, Mike Krzyzewski (Shuh - SHEF - ski), teaches us about discipline, particularly discipline as selective attention.

He came to Duke in 1980. By his third year, he was being booed in his own gym.

On March 11, 1983, the Duke Blue Devils suffered their worst defeat in school history, a 109-66 loss to Virginia. In the team's hotel after the game, fans and alumni shrank from Krzyzewski as if he had a contagious disease.

As he sat with his assistant coaches that night, someone suggested they recruit new players. **"Absolutely not,"** Krzyzewski said, his voice steely. He then pushed forward a sheet of paper with five names on it -- four of them freshmen players from the night's debacle. **"This will be our squad next year,"** he said. **"Losing doesn't make you a loser unless you think you're a loser. I'm not quitting on these kids."**

An assistant coach offered a toast: **"Here's to forgetting tonight ever happened".**

Krzyzewski picked up his iced tea and looked around the table. **"Here's to never forgetting,"** he said.

There's a key -- Never forget a defeat, because that's the key to victory. Do you see it? You give attention to defeat, and discipline yourself in response to it, in order to know victory. For the Christian, that means giving our attention to that which we know is life giving and redemptive.

We have to engage ourselves in all those disciplines -- prayer, Bible Study, worship, witnessing, good stewardship habits, meaningful conversation with Christian friends -- all those disciplines that make us more and more attentive to what Christ would do in and through our lives.

It's a haunting question as asked in the NIV translation: **"You don't want to leave too, do you?"** Friends, I want to remind you that we don't answer that question one time once and for all -- but at many stages on our Christian walk. Determination and discipline will assure the redemptive response: **"Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life."**

Pastor Larry Smith

03-02-08