

To Whom Can We Go?

John 6:56-69

During a flight from New York to Chicago, the captain announced on the plane's speakers, "Our number four engine has just been shut off because of mechanical trouble. There's no need to be alarmed. We can still make our flight with three engines. Besides, you will be reassured to know that we have four pastors on board."

One passenger called the flight attendant and said, "Would you please tell the captain that I would rather have four engines and three pastors."

It's interesting that our human nature is such that we prefer to be in control during the journey. When it comes to a fear of flying, it is often much more complex than a fear of heights or a fear of a crash. It's often about a loss of control. When the door is sealed and the jet way is moved, there is nothing you can do but sit there. You can't stop the aircraft because you left your iphone on a seat at the gate. You can't rush the captain of the tarmac. You have no say about airspeed if you're running late. You think about the possibility of a crash and realize that your very life is in the hands of a stranger.

Those of you who know me know that I enjoy Starbucks's coffee. When I see others with a Starbucks cup, it feels like we're part of some kind of brotherhood, like back in my motorcycle days when I would wave at all the riders I saw.

A couple summers ago, my family was preparing to board a flight from Chicago to L.A., I noticed the captain carrying his Starbucks coffee into the jet way. This time I had a slightly different feeling about what I saw. Are we not feeling alert this morning? What if he spills his beverage when he lifts the nose off the runway? What if something goes awry while he's on a restroom break? Now, I love to fly, but it takes effort to be comfortable having no control over how my journey is going.

Life is a journey in which our lack of control can be the foundation for a lot of anxiety. Life experience teaches us that even when we make our best effort to walk morally upright, making good choices and trusting God, we still can face one trial after another. We find ourselves questioning God to the extent that we would just as soon be solely responsible for our own lives.

Some of us get hit with one financial difficulty after another. We face all sorts of health problems. We have loved ones whose lifestyles or vocations scare the living daylights out of us. Sometimes we come to the point where we finally say, “Why? Why would God let all of these things happen? When is God going to act? When is God going to start making some sense?”

We shake our heads when we hear stories about people who stop worshipping because of fringe issues. Sometimes people disappear because of a burning anger toward God. Living the Christian life used to make sense. Suddenly they are disappointed, so they go away. If we give up and go away, then to whom shall we turn?

Jesus’ disciples had what I think is an awesome privilege. They were able to perceive his presence with all five of their senses. They were familiar with his appearance. They knew the sound of his voice. They knew what his hands felt like. What a comfort it must have been to be in the company of Jesus himself. That is, until Jesus stopped making sense.

In all of Jesus’ teaching in this long chapter about bread and eternal life, he ends up bringing the disciples out of their comfort zone. It seems that the disciples thought about the exodus and God’s provision of manna in the wilderness in a way that was all neatly organized and put into a theological box where everything fits just right. Manna is God’s way of looking out for the children of Israel. They received a blessing every day until they reached the promised land. The end. Amen.

Then Jesus has this monologue about the bread of life, which starts out nicely but ends with the command to eat his body and drink his blood. What’s that all about? Even today, scholars go around and around arguing that the historical Jesus did or did not utter those words. That command sounds so sacramental and Eucharistic as to suggest that a Christian scribe has altered the text. This would have the effect of sending a message to ancient Docetic spiritualists would claimed Christian symbolism is a useless distraction. Ignatius of Antioch used these words of Jesus to assert that abstaining from Eucharistic bread and wine is an unholy and scandalous diminishing of the crucified Christ.

Well, that’s all interesting, but what if we simply remain inside the story as we have it. The disciples have just heard about this flesh eating and blood drinking for the first time. Jesus has not yet been crucified. His body has not yet been broken, and his blood has not yet been shed. The Lord’s supper has not yet been instituted. They must have been dumbfounded! They say to Jesus, “**This is a difficult teaching. Who can accept it?**” Just when their faith was

making good sense, Jesus starts messing with the old, old story. Verse 66 says that **“Because of this, many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him.”**

These aren't curious visitors. They are identified as disciples. As such, they have traveled close to Jesus on his itinerant ministry. Suddenly faith becomes so complicated and so challenging that many decide to go away.

Finally, Jesus turns to the twelve, the closest, most constant group. **“Do you also wish to go away?”**

Then Peter, in his usual fine style, says, **“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.”**

Peter had come to believe that Jesus spoke truth about life. Even if he didn't understand these new words, he couldn't turn back now. Where else would he go?

The followers of Jesus, at their best times, have understood that life's journey isn't a nice straight line. It throws us curves of one kind or another all the time. No matter how hard we try to straighten things out, we find that we don't have that kind of power. Cancer, a broken relationship, a sick child, an accident, a job loss, an abusive spouse, bad news, bad memories, these are not events that we can easily straighten out.

Some of you will recall a movie that was filmed at Evansville's Bosse Field. *A League of Their Own* is a film based on female major-league baseball teams of the 1940's. In one of the most powerful scenes of the movie, the star catcher of the Rockford Peaches, played by Geena Davis, threatens to quit. She's tired; she's worn out; she's worried about her husband who has gone to war; and in a low moment, she's ready to call it quits. This star catcher, by far the best in the league, complains that the game is just too hard. The manager of the Rockford Peaches, played by Tom Hanks, tries to talk her out of quitting.

When she says, "It's too hard," he replies, "Well, baseball's supposed to be hard... If it weren't hard, everybody would do it." And then he says this: "Hard is what makes it great!"

The same could be said about the Christian life: Hard is what makes it great. Jesus says things like, "Love your enemies. Pray for those who persecute you. Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect. Eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood." These are hard teachings. How can we stay in the game when so much is going on?

When things are going well, we like to think that life's problem can be met with straightforward solutions. When trials start showing up at every other turn, we feel powerless and overwhelmed. Jesus calls us to discipleship even during those times. Do we give in to the temptation to doubt and give up, or do we continue to sing our praises to Jesus with wild abandon? If not Jesus, who? To whom can we go?

It is precisely because Jesus' words ring true that we cannot leave. Who else will tell us about eternal life? Who else can teach us about justice and peace? Who else can be praised for all those moments when things seem so right? Who else have we known so long?

There are times when we feel like declaring God's absence. How many times has someone recalled a time when they were aware of God's presence, only to say that presence is now missing? Jesus himself cries out from the cross, **"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"** Some readers have gone so far as to say that Jesus was forsaken.

It is highly unlikely that an omnipresent God could come up missing. In his book, *The Suffering of God*, Terence Fretheim discusses God's presence in the world. He perceptively names what he calls intensification of the divine presence. Have you even been with a small group of people and come to the conclusion that one person who was present was somewhere else. Perhaps someone seemed distracted and wasn't focused on the group's conversation. It's not that he or she was absent, but, in a way, they were somewhere else.

Now, this isn't to suggest that God has occasions to have an attention deficit, but that God's presence seems more intense at certain times. Whether or not God is making an appearance or showing evidence of a tabernacling presence among a people, whether the psalmist feels forsaken by God or Jonah is trying to flee the presence of the Lord, it has always been understood in the Old Testament that God is always present in creation. The psalmist also says, **"Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there. If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there."** So a perceived "absence of God" does not mean that God has left you or that God doesn't care.

When life seems out of control and things are tough, would we wish to go away? Peter says, **"To whom can we go?"** The psalmist suggests there is no escape. Already being aware of the love of God and the teachings of Jesus, where could we go to escape them or find something better? Once you've become a disciple of Jesus, going away never seems like a viable option.

John's gospel begins with: **“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”** For followers of Jesus, there is something about the Word that we cannot find anywhere else. The Word becomes a part of us. It makes us who we are. The words don't make all of life's troubles go away, really. But when we are winding on our way, retracing our steps and losing our way at times, we need not feel utterly lost. We are not lost because the Word offers us the hope that we will one day reach our destination, and it offers us the confidence that this trial will pass.

We don't have to wonder if we will ever be among the disciples who walk away. We can't help but stay because we have found something that we've never known anywhere else. John's gospel is headed toward the cross with these sometimes difficult sayings of Jesus. It's a rough and winding path—confusing, frightening and difficult. But we have come to believe that Jesus' words are true, and so we stay to listen and to follow.

The resurrected Christ says in the book of Revelation, **“Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me. To the one who conquers I will give a place with me on my throne, just as I myself conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne. Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.”** Amen.