

SERMON  
Time after Pentecost – Lectionary 21  
August 23, 2009

Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18  
Psalm 34:15-22  
Ephesians 6:10-20  
John 6:56-69

Brothers and sisters in Christ, grace to you and peace from God the Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, who is the Christ. Amen.

I would like to begin by telling you about a scene in a movie that came out several years ago. The movie, *“An Officer and a Gentleman”* starred Richard Gere who had just entered basic training in the hopes of becoming a Navy Pilot. His Drill Sergeant’s role was played by Louis Gossett Jr.

Gere’s character was portrayed as a cocky, self-centered young man who was very street savvy. He was anything but a team player, and had actually joined the Navy just to get back at his less than stellar father.

On the side, he had a deal going with a civilian who would polish boots and belt buckles for some of the other trainees. Gere acted as the middleman, who collected money for his services. Well, one day, the Drill Sergeant found out what was going on and asked for Gere’s DOR. That’s; Drop on Request. In other words, he wanted Gere to quit. Gere refused.

So his Drill Sergeant began to make him suffer enough so that he would want to quit. He made him run circles around the flagpole carrying his rifle for hours. He made him scrub the bathrooms with a toothbrush. He took away all of his privileges, all the while calling on Gere to DOR. And then came this scene:

Gere was doing nonstop pushups in the mud with his Drill Sergeant pouring water on him with a hose. He was screaming, “I want your DOR! I want your DOR! I want your DOR!” And Gere kept shouting back, “No, I will not quit! No, I will not quit!” Finally, the Drill Sergeant says “Fine, I’m kicking you out.”

At that point, Gere broke down in tears screaming “You can’t do that! You can’t do that!” “Why not,” said the Drill Sergeant. Then Gere totally broke down and said, “I have nowhere else to go, I have nowhere else to go.” I thought of this scene after reading our Gospel story for today. You will see how it relates later on.

You see, a series of events had been set into place when Jesus fed the 5,000 plus people, on the hillside in Galilee. Suddenly, thousands began to follow Jesus, not for his message, but for his bread.

They compared him to Moses and began to ask, “If you are from God, then feed us like Moses fed his followers.” They thought that if they hang out with Jesus, there will always be a free lunch involved.

But then Jesus describes a different kind of bread – his flesh. And he says; “if you do not eat my flesh and drink my blood, you can no longer be my disciple.”

These words went over like the proverbial lead balloon. They speak of death and suffering instead of free food and socializing. But Jesus would not have it any other way. He would not back away from what he had said. We are told that many of his disciples said, “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?”

Again, we have Jesus drawing a line in the sand. What happened that day was that the Gospel became suddenly, and radically, uncomfortable. Those who had been following Jesus to get bread, get fish, get healed, or even get a new political leader that will lead a rebellion against the Romans, were confronted with a Gospel that wasn’t about “getting”. Rather it was about giving – giving everything! Therefore, many left and went their own way.

And notice what Jesus didn't do. He didn't go running after them saying, "Please, come back. I'm sorry, you must have misunderstood me. Is there another way I could have said it that would have been less offensive?" For they had heard the words of Jesus perfectly. They just didn't want to hear those words anymore. For them, the cost of following Jesus was just too great.

One of my favorite rock bands in the 80's was a band named, "The Clash". They had a great dance hit named, "Should I Stay or Should I Go Now." That is what the followers of Jesus had to decide. Do I continue to follow this Jesus, or maybe take the easy way out and go back to my old ways?

You see, we are free to reject the gift that God has given us in Jesus Christ. We can say, like the followers years ago; "This teaching is too hard for me – I'm out of here." For God forces Jesus on no one. God force-feeds no one with the Bread of Life. God doesn't save us at gunpoint. God simply gives us his unconditional love and opens his arms to all.

So Jesus turned to his closest disciples, the twelve – his apostles-in-training who had followed him from the beginning, and he looked them straight in the eyes and said, "What about you? Are you going to leave me also?"

And then Simon Peter responded with those familiar words, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life."

Simon Peter had been following Jesus for some time. Jesus was his Lord. Surely, these words upset him too. He probably was not prepared for those hard words of Jesus. He certainly could have left in despair like so many others. But Peter says, "Lord, to whom shall we go? To whom shall we go?"

And so Peter, along with the other disciples decided to stick it out. After all, they had given everything. His followers ranged from the well-to-do (like Matthew), to the common laborers, (like Peter, Andrew, James, and John).

They had careers – in the Middle Eastern sense – they had lives, families, friends that were all put on hold as they committed themselves to Jesus. They gave it all up.

And that is why they also could say, “to whom shall we go?” For they had no other options. They had purposefully placed themselves in a situation where self-reliance was no longer possible. They were in a position of total dependency and vulnerability.

I would say that THOSE words are “difficult teachings” for us modern day Americans. After all, our country was founded on being independent, not only as a nation, but also as individuals. What’s this talk of dependency? And to have to rely on someone other than yourself, that’s just not right. And to be vulnerable – never!

But there are times in which we are forced to be dependent, forced to rely on others, forced to be vulnerable. And I believe that it is during those times when our faith is the strongest. It’s when we realize that we don’t have ultimate control of every situation. And sometimes we flat run out of options. It is then that we too say, “Lord, to whom shall we go?”

Everyone here this morning has asked this question whether we realize it or not.

The doctors have run out of options. They have tried every medicine possible. Surgery is not an option. It’s only a matter of time. “Lord, to whom shall we go?”

My company has downsized. My services are no longer needed. The paycheck has stopped coming in, but the bills haven’t. It’s been months now, and jobs are not easy to find. Soon they will take our car and our house. “Lord, to whom shall we go?”

My daughter won’t listen to me. She is going down a path that will lead to her self-destruction. I have tried to reach out to her. I’ve tried to arrange for counseling. I have bailed her out financially until it has affected my own well being. “Lord, to whom shall we go?”

They all make fun of me at school. I have become the butt of all jokes. I have no friends. I don't like the way I look. I really don't know if I want to go on living. "Lord, to whom shall we go?"

It's so lonely. When my husband was alive, at least we had each other. Now, the television has become my way of making it through the day. I wish someone would just call me once in a while. "Lord, to whom shall we go?"

But I am assuming that since we are here this morning, we have a clue to the answer. We have come to the place where we can hear the words of eternal life. For the Church – the Body of Christ is the only place we can go if we call ourselves disciples of Jesus.

Did you hear it? Just before the reading of the Gospel. Sing it with me: *"Alleluia, Alleluia, Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. Alleluia."*

For it is here that these words of eternal life come alive in us and for us. It is these words that will carry us through the chaos, the despair, the doubt, and the sin in our lives.

Even when everything else seems to be falling apart. Even when every attempt to save ourselves has failed, Jesus will be there. It is these words that will take us to the grave, and through the grave to the resurrection.

To whom shall we go? I think that deep down inside we know the answer. Jesus alone has the flesh and blood that gives real food for eternal life. And he alone has the word. Word and Bread, flesh and blood. Sounds like Word and Sacrament. Sounds like what goes on here in this very place every week. Here, today. For you. Amen.

May the peace that passes all understanding be with you now and for life everlasting. Amen.