

I Need to Do What, Jesus? – John 6: 56-69
Sermon prepared and preached by Rev. Don Hammond
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Sometimes people wonder where things come from. Fred Craddock is a preacher who excels at telling stories and folding them into the Christian message. In his book *Craddock Stories*, he tells this story:

“A young woman said to me, during her freshman year of college, “I was a failure in my classes; I wasn’t having any dates; and I didn’t have as much money as the other students, I was just so lonely and depressed and homesick and not succeeding. One Sunday afternoon, I went to the river near the campus. I had climbed up on the rail of the bridge and was looking into the dark water below. For some reason or another I thought of the line, ‘*Cast all your cares upon him for he cared for you*’.” Craddock then asked her ‘Where did you learn that line?’ She responded ‘I don’t know.’ ‘Do you go to church?’ Craddock followed with. ‘No... Well, when I visited my grandmother in the summers we went to Sunday school and church.’ Craddock said ‘Ah.’ ”

Earlier this summer Nancy and I toured one of the old historic houses in Nebraska City. The docent explained the many historic and easily overlooked parts of the house. It was in the downstairs room near the kitchen that she pointed out the spinning wheel. When the wheel would become full of yarn there was an unusual part that would sense the fullness of the wheel and would automatically pop and cut the yarn to prevent a big mess from happening. That part was known as the “weasel.” When the wheel was used it was well before the days of electronics, and children would be fascinated with the way the wheel worked. Some clever mother used the children’s curiosity to create a rhyme that goes like this:

All around the mulberry bush
The monkey chased the weasel;
The monkey thought 'twas all in fun,
Pop! goes the weasel.

“Ah”, I thought. That is where that phrase “Pop goes the weasel” comes from. Don’t you often wonder where some things come from?

Often words lose meaning. In today's scripture lesson the word "dwell" is used. According to scholars, the original Greek word that was used in this passage was *meno*. It can be translated into "abide," but it can also mean endure or remain. (Mitzi L. Minor Lectionary Homiletics, Vol XX, No. 5, p27)

When Jesus spoke these words they were offensive and alienating to many of the people who worshiped in the synagogue that day. A deviant behavior within Jewish tradition (as well as most other traditions) was cannibalism, and Jesus' words that day were understood by most of those that gathered in that place, as aberrant cannibalism and the scripture read:

"Many of his disciples on hearing it exclaimed, 'this is more than we can stomach! Why listen to such talk.'...From that time on, many of his disciples withdrew and no longer went about with him."...

That was a defining moment in the life of Jesus, because at that time his disciples began to peel away, the ranks of his followers were thinned, and only a small number continued to count themselves as his disciples. When Jesus asked the other disciples if what he said shocked them and if they planned to leave, Peter spoke for others and said; "to whom else shall we go. You have the words of eternal life."

Words and ideas that come from those words can often confuse, alienate and offend. The opposite is also true. Sometimes people take a word and make it into something that it was never meant to be. Peter said: "you have the words of eternal life."

A few weeks ago I attended the General Assembly of The Christian Church (DOC) in Indianapolis. I am ordained in the Christian Church and it had been 20 years since I last attended a General Assembly, which is similar to the General Synod of the UCC. I roomed with two friends, both of whom are retired from pastoral ministry. We engaged in many conversations about the Church and the activities of the Assembly. During one of those conversations I asked this question of both of them: "Let's suppose that it were proven beyond any doubt that when Jesus died there was no resurrection and that his death was indeed just death. You know, the lights go out, sounds and consciousness ends and there is nothing beyond the last breath. Would you still be a follower? Would you still call yourself a Christian?"

Instantly and simultaneously they answered: “absolutely.” Both of them then added, “I never became a Christian or entered ministry in search of a reward of life beyond this life.” Such an image was never their motivation for being a Christian.

Rev. Paul G. Janssen of Pascack Reformed Church in New Jersey wrote in a sermon: *“Eternal life isn’t really about what happens to us individually after we shuffle off this mortal coil. A more accurate but inelegant translation reminds us that ‘eternal life’ is the life of the age to come. Life as we will live it in God’s future. Life as it was meant to be.”*

So Jesus essentially asks his disciples and also all of us, “Why are you in this? Why will you be one of my disciples?” He tells them “When you make me part of your life then I will ENDURE with you through everything and in all days. You will not be alone.”

I fear that too often the teachings of the Church deviate from this profound declaration of Jesus. Too often, by too many, Christianity is turned into a “reward religion.” If there is any reward, it is that Jesus will endure with us through everything if we take upon ourselves the same burdens, responsibilities and efforts to make this world into an eternal living that God has in mind.

During my vacation Nancy and I traveled all over Montana and Idaho. Mostly it was because she needed to visit archives to get materials for the book she is writing. As it happened, we drove by the community where I served my first congregation, so we left the highway and went into town. As we passed the church and the parsonage where we had lived, all the difficult memories came back. It was a place that almost chased me out of both the church and pastoral ministry. It was a terribly painful and frightening time in my life. I doubted I had the strength to endure another experience like that. I was close to being one of the disciples that said, “this is more than I can stomach,” and ceased being a follower. To this day I do not completely understand why I did not cut and run, but I too found myself wondering, “where else could I go?” It took me a while to discard the pain and the fears, but I somehow let them go. However, I never let go of what I learned from those days. Looking back upon that time I now know that I was never alone. I believe that is what Jesus tells his disciples when he said:

“Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood endures continually in me and I endure in you”

Your job is to help establish an eternal living, a world the way God will have it be, and there can be no greater reward than knowing that in every one of your efforts to be the presence of Jesus, he will endure with you. You will not be alone. I think that is what Jesus wants us to do!

“So Jesus asked the Twelve, ‘Do you also want to leave me?’ Simon Peter answered him, ‘Lord, to whom shall we go? Your words are words of eternal life.’”

Amen.