

Rev. Dr. Anne Bain Epling
First Presbyterian Church
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John 6:56-69

Eternal God, quiet our hearts and minds amid the clattering chaos of the world and all the voices vying for our attention. May we clearly hear your word of life spoken to us today. As we hear, help us to understand; as we understand, move us to respond in love, for the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ; Amen.

“Does This Offend You?”

A preacher tells a story about starting an evangelism program at his last church. About six months into the program a group of members got together and discussed how things were going. By all accounts, things were going quite well. A large number of people had responded favorably to members' invitations to attend the church and the church was growing. Attendance was up, and so was membership.

What more could they ask for?

But Gladys, a member of the church, spoke up. “Something bothers me about all this,” she said. “Here we go, knocking on people’s doors, urging them to come to our church and to accept Christ. But what are we inviting them to? We tell them that we have a great youth program, and that we will do this or that for their children. We have great summer activities for all ages. We have pastoral counseling, good music in our service, and great preaching. In other words, we have all these services to meet their needs, to entertain them, and to fix what’s wrong with their life.”

What’s wrong with that? Everyone asked. Isn’t that what church is all about?

“Seems like I remember,” Gladys continued, “Somewhere Jesus says, ‘Take up your cross and follow me. Not I follow you.’”

And the people were silent.

I knew a preacher years ago who made a simple announcement one Sunday morning asking people to use the rear door of the sanctuary if they had to come and go during the worship service. That announcement created a huge uproar in the church. At a meeting where it was discussed someone turned to one of the members who had been particularly offended by the announcement and said to her, "You know, it's not really about you." When the upset member left the church she admitted it wasn't really the preacher's announcement that caused her to leave, it was the member telling her that "it isn't really about her."

Sometimes we need a wake-up call that discipleship, Christian discipleship . . . isn't about us. That it's not all about you or your needs and wants, or me and my needs and wants. That it's really about God and God's wants and needs.

And hopefully hearing that won't be so offensive to you that you'll leave the church, like that woman did.

But if on the off chance you do find it just a little offensive, know that you're not alone. Jesus knew a lot of what he said and did and asked others to say and do was offensive. If he didn't, he wouldn't have asked the disciples after hearing them murmur about how difficult his teachings are, "Does this offend you?" Well Jesus, sometimes it does.

I find it really interesting in today's OT and NT readings that we hear two stories about groups of people who are presented with a fork in the road: "Choose this day whom you will serve," Joshua asked the Israelites. And "Do you also want to go away?" Jesus asked the disciples. Two forks in the road, two real choices with real consequences.

Interestingly, what's at stake in these decisions is not the identity or eternal salvation of the choosers. In the reading from Joshua, the Israelites are already chosen and beloved by God. They have a long history with God — a history of deliverance from slavery, manna in the desert, and steady

direction in the wilderness. Likewise, the people who abandon Jesus are not starry-eyed newbies; John's Gospel makes it clear that they are already Christ's "disciples." He has fed them, taught them, healed them, and loved them.

No, what's at stake in both stories is whether or not God's already-beloved-and-rescued children will choose to live fully into who they already are. And not just when it's convenient; not just when it suits them or their needs and wants, but hourly, daily, moment by moment.

And it's worth noting that neither Joshua nor Jesus take pains to make choosing God easy. If anything, they make it harder. Joshua explains in no uncertain terms what God requires. "If you'd rather worship the idols of your ancestors, go for it," he tells his listeners. "Because the life God calls you to is no joke." Likewise, Jesus doesn't argue back or make excuses when his followers take offense and deem his teachings "too hard."

Because the things Jesus says to his disciples and instructs them to do are hard. Jesus never said: "Follow me, but only when it's convenient." He didn't say: "Follow me, after you've taken care of your agenda." He didn't say: "Follow me, it will be a simple trip -- only a cross awaits." He said: "Follow me."

And what does it mean to follow him, to choose him? According to Jesus, it means "eating" his very essence, i.e. taking his teachings so deeply into our own bodies and souls that we exude Christ to the world. It means doing what Jesus did and living as Jesus lived. It means loving our enemies. It means walking the extra mile. It means losing our lives in order to gain them. It means trusting that the first will be last and the last first. It means seeking God's kingdom and God's righteousness. It means denying ourselves. And it means the cross.

Does this offend you; Jesus asked the disciples?

If we're being honest, we'd admit that sometimes it does.

What's sticks out to me in hearing today's story is that Jesus never attended the School of Modern Church Growth which teaches among others things to: sing upbeat hymns that everyone can follow and make people happy; don't say a prayer of confession, we wouldn't want anyone to get the impression they have any faults; make everyone feel good; and don't ask too much of them. That's how you build a church. But here Jesus is and what does he do? Instead of signing people up, he challenges them. No "Christ lite" for him.

There's a lot of talk in church circles these days about the difference between membership and discipleship. Are we just trying to get members, people ask, or are we trying to make disciples of people? I think that's an interesting question to think about in our quest for membership growth. Is it about a number on the church rolls, or is it about discipleship?

For what it's worth, I don't think the two need to be mutually exclusive. But I do think if we really want members to also be disciples then it's OK to say to people that this church thing will require something of you. It will require your time and talents and money, and it will require you to share your gifts and skills. Not because it's about what we want and need but because it's about what God requires of God's followers.

Someone once said that discipleship is a way of life. It's everything we say and do after we say "we believe" because following Jesus is not one among a number of things on our to-do list. It is our to-do list, and everything else follows that. And notice that when some of the disciples walk away from Jesus, as they do in today's story, he doesn't go running after them offering a compromise. He lets them wander off with their questions unanswered and their doubts unresolved because he's not so much user-friendly as he is unflinchingly honest. Yes, this teaching is hard. But it's also glorious and life-giving, and it matters.

There are countless people in this community and beyond, who have no idea ***how much God matters and can make a difference in their lives and is trying to make a difference in the world through people like us.*** Because They don't the God Jesus introduces us to – the God who seeks the lost and tends to the broken,

the God who puts mercy ahead of law and compassion before custom, the God who forgives sinners and welcomes all people to the table.

This God is who Jesus introduces us to, this God matters. In a world that is increasingly divisive and hatred is stoked, in a world in which the church has been co-opted by far too many Christian nationalists, this God-who is none of those things- this God who Jesus introduces us to matters and needs to be known.

Sharing the teachings, and the love, and the justice of that God (who Christ introduces us to) with the world is the most important thing we can ever do with our lives, and the more importance, the more passion, and the more urgency we place on it, the more we will grow-and not only numerically, but also spiritually and in the depth of our faith.

Do we want to follow? It is a journey. The early Christians were known and called "people of the way." It is still true. It is a way of living, of life, of commitment, of challenge, but also of grace, of hope, and of love. The call of Jesus is a call for loyalty to follow not only when it's convenient or when all our tasks and lists are checked off or when we feel like it. But to follow him into the world where we now become his hands and feet for compassion, his voice for justice and mercy, his arms for reconciliation, and his heart for the hurting, the hungry, the weak, and the vulnerable.

I think that is a call worth following and one that deserves our "yes", no matter how hard the choice is or how much it may sometimes offend us.

Amen.

Sources:

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