

Twenty-first Sunday – August 23, 2015

We've been slogging through the 6th chapter of St. John's gospel for the past 3 weekends. We've come now to the dramatic decision point. Stay or leave. Today's gospel mirrors for us a decision we all have to make. We just can't keep postponing our act of faith. We may think we can just cruise along and get by being decent and fair. But when the time comes, either a health crisis or the loss of a friend or family member, either a failure of hope or despair about the future, we've got to make a decision. Life gets more complicated as we go, and deeper questions require deeper answers. No one escapes the mystery of suffering and loss that leads to either hope or despair.

"Do you also want to go away?" Jesus asks. Peter, a Gospel character not known to rise to every occasion, says there's no other place to go. Jesus has everything they need. They will stay. Peter's reason for staying is this: "We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God." Coming to believe and know is a process that begins with trusting enough – and ends with understanding enough. Here's an example about how this works.

When I used to teach in high school and in college, I used to assign, every so often, a text as required reading that was very advanced and difficult. The reaction of the students was predictable. "Why can't she give more examples?" "She can't be serious." "I can't tell you how much I disagree with the stuff; it's not real to me at all!" I would go over segments of the book in class and try to teach the book. The students generally were not impressed or appeased. So I tell them after a while: "Hang in there; persevere." About halfway through the book, some lights go on. The comments change. "I think I have an example of that." "I'm beginning to take this stuff seriously." Soon many, but not all, are running with the material. They have come to believe and know. In my mind I think: "Never read a book you could write."

Spiritual teachers, like Jesus, are more advanced than those who follow them. This means that followers, initially, and maybe for a long time, must trust teachers, believe enough in what they say to stay around and explore it further. Followers just have to believe enough until they know enough.

Spiritual development within a faith tradition like ours often walks this path from belief to understanding. Do we wish to go away sometimes? Probably. But where else would we go? The Eucharist is our handle on everything we believe. There is no greater sign of faith anywhere else. The Eucharist teaches us to pray; it brings us into community; it nourishes our hungers; it even sends us forth to find and feed others who hunger still.

We have other options for a Sunday morning, but none as satisfying as this. "Lord, where else shall we go? You have the words of eternal life."