

Providence Presbyterian Church
Rev. Dr. David Pettit
August 22nd, 2021
John 6: 51-69

I was a hiker in my single years. I borrowed a backpack when I was 23 and wandered into the Adirondacks, having vacation time that I did not know how to use. I went backpacking for a few days. I summited Mt. Marcy on tired legs and was overcome by the beauty of creation. I was hooked. My vacations from then on usually involved hiking and backpacking or some other form of outdoor recreation. I eventually hiked all of the Adirondack 46ers with forays into the White Mountains and the Rockies out here in CO. When Holly and I met in the Adirondacks, we did several hikes together. One of our first dates was a hike, and not wanting to dismay this new flame, she quieted her thoughts of “what the bleep,” when the trail was frozen on that October day, and we ate our frozen sandwiches in the howling wind on top.

The transition to marriage and soon after that to having kids have dealt blows to my adventurous hopes and ideals. In the last ten years, we have still hiked. But rarely have I broke a sweat on our hikes. Often, much time is spent with Holly worrying about her kiddos and not wanting to get too far from emergency care, and the kids palpitating at the sight of a bee that might sting and give someone an allergic reaction, and so on. You mothers can probably relate, yes?! Hudson has often wilted in the sun and immediately want me to carry him on my back. There is usually a call for a snack before the trailhead is even out of sight. Hudson cooperates better if there is plenty of shade, rocks to climb on, and a plethora of food options. Now, I should add that the kids are getting older now. Hudson and I hiked several miles this summer with fly rods in hand, and Abby and I summited a thirteener. And Holly reminds me that we have had many enjoyable adventures.

On our recent vacation, we played in the ocean. Sat on our duffs, ran along with our feet in the water, splashed in the waves. There were no complaints. However, the last stop of our vacation was Zion National Park. We negotiated the trail. Holly wanted to do the easy hike to a natural pool with every other non-hiker under the planet. I argued for Angel’s point trail, but without the death-defying chain-holding-on end of the trail. We would stop at Scout’s landing. It was agreed to. It was a steep trail, with lots of switchbacks. There were sharp drop-offs, the elevation gain was long and consistent. There were moments when complaints started, moments of heavy breathing and serious looks. But we made it to Scout’s landing. And it was worth it.

And I was thankful we did not notice the gigantic rattlesnake under the rock on the edge of the trail until our way down. If we noticed it on the way up, I fear there would have been mutiny and an immediate and involuntary retreat to the bottom at record speed.

Our gospel passage this morning harkens back to the Israelite's sojourn in the wilderness, where there too was a fair amount of complaining, of asking "how much longer," and "what do we have to eat," and "awwwww, I don't like that," and mutiny over every threat that presented itself. And yet, God leads them from one snack to the other, like a family hike, across the desert, manna in the morning and quail at night. The daily provisions were God's way of sustaining and encouraging them along the way – as they stared out into an endless landscape. The daily provisions encouraged them that God was indeed leading them somewhere and somewhere good, that God had not led them out into the wilderness to die.

Jesus now proclaims himself to be the new manna; the new provision come down from heaven. John both casts Jesus as harkening back to the wilderness provision of God and as foreshadowing the eucharist, foreshadowing Jesus as the bread and drink that gives life and sustenance. Jesus is the new provision we are invited to turn to each day. It is the feast of bread and wine that connects us to God's presence and care, even as we stare into an endless landscape of human sin and suffering and the uncertainty that invades our lives.

Jesus' declaration stirs up its own complaining with his followers, however. It creates controversy. After all, talk of eating his flesh and drinking his blood does sound strange. More than strange, it would be sacrilegious and unclean to Jesus' listeners. The complaining becomes such that many begin to turn away. Like the Israelites in the wilderness who wanted to go back to the fleshpots of Egypt, they grumble. They accuse, and many turn aside. "When many of his disciples heard it, they said, 'This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?'" "Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him."

Jesus, like a father on a family hike who pushed too hard and fast, risks continuing on by himself. He turns to his faithful core, and he says, are you going to turn back as well?

For my family, they might say, "Dad, we are supposed to be on vacation." The Israelites in the wilderness wanted to say to God, "you are supposed to lead us to comfort, freedom, and prosperity." And Jesus' followers are saying, you are supposed to be a successful messiah. You sound crazy. Just wait for your end-of-

year eval! They saw the rattlesnake too soon, and they all want to turn back well before the summit. It is the inevitable conflict of expectations, and the potential abandonment of what is possible. They are walking away before Jesus' plan and takes course.

They are leaving. They are going back. The group of those following is getting smaller. How does it feel to be among those left? You look around and wonder for yourself, what are you going to do? In the endless landscape of life, of uncertainty, and of the options of a consumer world, of different traditions and paths, why do you stay? In the weariness of the trail, of the rocks and roots to step over, of the blazing sun – of the disappointments, of the questions and doubts – many have turned aside for one reason or another.

But to Jesus' question to those remaining, are you going to leave too, Peter returns with a beautiful confession: "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." There is something there for Peter and the twelve. Despite the things they don't know or understand, despite the way the journey is taking turns they didn't expect, there is some core of hope and wholeness in Jesus. Where else would we go?

So I wonder, If Jesus was to turn to you, as he did to the twelve, and ask, are you going to turn away too, how would you answer? Would you answer something like Peter's words? – something to the effect of "where else would we go?" What is found in Jesus that you could not find elsewhere? What is found in the church that cannot be found elsewhere? Would your answer say something about how in Jesus you have found food, and life, and hope, and help and comfort – in you, Jesus the Christ, we have found the words of eternal life. In the church, we have found community and grace.

I think of our poem this morning about the blackpoll warbler on its migration. Carried by some unspoken instinct, guided by some unseen map, to a place across the waters, eighty hours away. Carried along by some inner voice, inner guidance. "Oh she is not so different from us," the poet writes, "The arc of our lives is a mystery too." We are carried along and pulled towards the light also.

It makes me wonder about the core of our faith. What is at the heart of this journey, because much changes over time. Challenges, and steep trails, and rattlesnakes along the edges, and fellow travelers turning back, and what keeps us going? Surely we start on the journey of faith for different reasons. In fact, many a young man has professed Christ because there were cute girls in the youth group. Many in

Jesus' day started to follow because Jesus offered a practical benefit, like healing or making clean what was unclean. Many were intrigued and drawn along. But what keeps someone there over time, when it gets hard, or confusing, or circumstances grow discouraging?

The Israelites started on the journey because of the promised land. They had a vision that drew them. The disciples had their own ideas that drew them to follow Jesus around. We all began in the journey of faith for different reasons, and in different ways. But what the Israelites learn along the way is covenant, is relationship, is trust, is the God who called them out of Egypt. The same is true for the disciples, they came to know the Christ, and were compelled by covenant and relationship more than any specific idea or hope.

This fall, we will continue to think about and hold open this notion of the core. What is at the heart of our faith journey? A lot changes in life. Even for God's people throughout the scriptures, the paradigms change, from provision in the wilderness to a temple, back to bread come down from heaven. A lot changes over time. But what is the consistent core? What guides us and sustains us in our faith.

On August 31st, we are going to gather and tell stories about your journey here at Providence. What were the moments of clarity, when God met you here? What is the core of this church that might thrive no matter what changes around us? A lot changes over time. A lot can change. But there is a core; there is a heart of the matter. Isn't there? What is it?

For Peter and the disciples, Jesus has the words of life. Life. I think of what John writes towards the end of his gospel. "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing, you may have life in his name.

Now I began by talking about a father pushing his family up hiking trails, and the negotiations and accommodations that have gone on over time. There is a wisdom to not pushing too hard or too far and discouraging or disparaging your followers. I have not always known that wisdom. It is hard to know how hard to push or how to motivate at times. Perhaps you know that with your own family, or your students, or your coworkers or employees. But we hope that something gets discovered along the way that might come to motivate them apart from us. I hope that my kids might come to discover the moment of exhilaration and exhaustion that comes from reaching a summit or accomplishing a goal. I want them to come to know the

love and relationship one can have with Christ, to help us navigate all the negative voices that come at us in life.

There is a core to this faith and to this journey. And it is worth it, if only we can discover it, and instill it, and stay in touch with that core, with those words of life.

And all God's people said...

John 6: 51-69

⁵¹ I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”

⁵² The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” ⁵³ So Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. ⁵⁴ Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; ⁵⁵ for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. ⁵⁶ Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. ⁵⁷ Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. ⁵⁸ This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever.” ⁵⁹ He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum.

The Words of Eternal Life

⁶⁰ When many of his disciples heard it, they said, “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?” ⁶¹ But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, “Does this offend you? ⁶² Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? ⁶³ It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. ⁶⁴ But among you there are some who do not believe.” For Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe, and who was the one that would betray him. ⁶⁵ And he said, “For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father.”

⁶⁶ Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. ⁶⁷ So Jesus asked the twelve, “Do you also wish to go away?” ⁶⁸ Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. ⁶⁹ We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.”