

Have you ever had a time in your life
when "everything came together? "
It might have been a class in high school or college.
Something the teacher or professor said
suddenly made sense and the whole subject
came together for you.

Or maybe it was something simple like
your mother repeating to you over and over again,
"Haste makes waste."
As a child and especially as a teenager,
she drove you nuts with her, *"Haste makes waste."*
But then that day came when you had
your own family and children and you
were rushing around like a juggler trying
to keep all the balls in the air and as the old saying goes,
"...the faster you went, the behinder you got..."

And your mother's words found their way
through the chaos... *"Haste makes waste,"*
and you stopped -- and slowed down -- and you thought,
"So this is what she meant."

Our gospel reading this morning is about
the time Jesus' closest followers experienced
when it *all came together*.
And when it did, they had to make
a decision and a commitment.

One of the great issues dealing with human belief
is the issue of religion and life,
Christianity and character,
word and spirit!

The great American poet,
Ralph Waldo Emerson once said,
"Who you are speaks so loudly
I cannot hear what you're saying."

Years ago Harry Emerson Fosdick then
at the height of his influence as pastor of Riverside Church,
in New York City was making a tour of Palestine
and other countries of the Middle East.
He was invited to give an address
at American University, in Beirut, Lebanon,
where the student body was comprised of citizens

from sixteen different religions!

What could he say that would be relevant to so diverse a group?

Here is how Rev. Fosdick opened his remarks:

"I do not ask anyone here to change his religion; but, I do ask all of you to face up to this question, 'What is your religion doing to your character?'"

So what is your religion doing to your character?

How is what you believe impacting your life and the life of others?

In today's gospel, we learn of how, after listening to Jesus teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum, many of his disciples found his words difficult to the extent where they could no longer be Jesus' disciples.

Jesus was teaching them about eating and drinking his flesh and blood.

To many, this was going too far.

How could they, being faithful Jews, participate in the most offensive act of cannibalism?

Such a teaching went beyond sound reasoning and common understanding.

However, Jesus was not teaching or advocating that his disciples practice cannibalism.

Rather, he was speaking of living in relationship with him as God's Holy One who would open the door to the Father.

The Message Bible says our scripture like this:

"The Spirit can make life. Sheer muscle and willpower don't make anything happen.

Every Word I've spoken to you is a Spirit-Word, and so it is life-making."

The disciples had a hard pill to swallow before they could make that commitment.

And there were stages and choices that took place in their commitment to Christ and that we also take in our discipleship journey.

First there are stages of our faith as we grow.

Stage 1 we might call the consumer stage.

Remember the crowds from a few weeks ago
who came looking for Jesus?

Jesus said to them that they came looking for him
only because they had eaten from the loaves
he provided and were back for more.
They came for what they could get.
The people had been stuck on the material.
After all, the day before Jesus had just fed over 5000 people.
He had, in effect, become to them,
the all-you-can-eat buffet man.

But when, Jesus claimed to come from heaven
and be the bread of life,
the people (pardon the pun) could not stomach it.
Jesus, though, was encouraging them to
look beyond the obvious temporal world,
and see the eternal.

Do you see that dynamic at all in our contemporary world?
People coming to religious institutions
for what can be had in the way of
services to children and families?
I've had people actually call and ask just that question.
*"We're looking for a church.
Can you tell me what you have to offer?"*
And that's not all bad.

That is a great starting point.
It is hard for people to grow deeper in their faith
if they are not there.
Reaching out in the name of Christ is a good thing
and the church offering services to families
and their children is a good thing.
It *is* important, however, to know that our
relationship with Jesus Christ and the family of faith
has an implicit journey from,
"What do you have to offer and what can I get?" - to –
"What can I offer and what can I give?"

Stage 2 faith takes place when those who come
for their own needs suddenly discover that the one
who meets their needs is more than a provider of food.
He *is* the food they need.

They come for physical food and encounter one

who claims to have the ability
to meet their deepest spiritual needs.
"I am the bread of life,"
Jesus told the crowds who came,
"Whoever eats of this bread will live forever..."
It was puzzling to many of them at first.
They did not fully understand what he meant.

As a matter of fact,
some of them were offended and did not like
his claims to such spiritual greatness.
60] When many of his disciples heard it,
they said, "This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?"
[61] But Jesus, knowing in himself that his disciples
were grumbling about this, said to them,
"Do you take offense at this?"

A struggle begins because the real Jesus
is not always easy to listen to or follow.
For many, Jesus is easy to follow at this point.
He had done great things.
He had performed miracles and healings.
He had fed over 5,000. It is easy to follow someone
who does those kinds of things.
But now it was getting more difficult.

The text tells us that they were listening.
They were taking it all in, hearing with appreciation.
And they were rightfully concluding that this was hard.
Following Jesus was no longer going
to be an easy task,
because He was saying things that disrupted
and upset the order of the day.
He still does.

They argued about his words and what they meant.
Sound familiar? People are arguing about Jesus to this day.
Was he a great teacher, the Son of God,
a wonderful prophet or a deluded pretender?
The discussion goes on endlessly,
but sooner or later we come to the
same place the crowds did so long ago.
"How can this man give us his flesh to eat?"

One of the wonderful things about Jesus is that
he never rejected people for asking questions

or having doubts and struggles.

It was most often out of difficult circumstances that people encountered Christ in a meaningful way. For a synagogue leader, it was a time of grief when his little girl died and Jesus came. Or a woman who had suffered hemorrhaging for years and Jesus brought healing. Another woman was the town's social reject and met Jesus out at the village well, encountered the One who brings freedom and became the town's greatest witness.

We, like the people of his own day, come to a time in our lives when we encounter Christ and his claims and move from the edges of the crowd to the center of the drama.

Is this the One who can feed our deepest hopes and dreams and mend our broken lives?

Stage 3 faith is when we move into "communion" with Christ. Whether it was *taught to us* as children or *caught by us* as adults, our knowledge *about* Christ becomes a relationship *with* Christ. We don't come to church because we grew up in it or it is what everyone tells us we are supposed to do. We live our lives in light of this friendship with the divine. We talk with him and we bring our loved ones to him in prayer. We actively do his work and become his hands.

Being citizens of this world however, we will find ourselves experiencing what Robert Robinson expressed in the hymn we sang, Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing, "*Prone to wander, Lord I feel it, Prone to leave the God I love...*" Yet, when all is said and done, there is that sense deep within that our lives are never far from the God who sustains us from day to day. Life *is* communion with Christ.

Stage 4 faith is a part of and the natural progression of communion with Christ. Authentic communion with Christ will lead to a commitment to Christ. Commitment to Christ means that we have a conscious attitude of being a follower of Jesus Christ in this world.

When the crowd in John had fully heard Jesus' claims,
many of them had enough.

"We're outta here!" they said.

Or in the words of scripture,
*"...many of his disciples turned back
and no longer went about with him."*

Did you catch that?

It wasn't just Jesus' detractors who
were put off by his claims;
these folks were among his disciples.
They were okay through stage one when
there was good teaching, healing and
occasional luncheons on a Galilean hillside,
but when Jesus made it clear who he was
and what he was all about,
they left before they ever got to stage two.

But those who stayed made a very conscious commitment
to stay the course and become not only followers of Jesus,
but followers who would be attentive
to his words and obedient to his commands.
They grew into stage 3 and 4 believers.

And perhaps it has made you wonder,
"What is it that keeps a person true to Jesus?
How can I stay a stage 3 and 4 disciple?
These are good questions.
For every believer, these are necessary questions.
There is a cost to following Jesus.
There are choices to make.
Let's see what the disciples decided once
they became stage 4 believers.

First, they made a conscious choice.
Even though they saw all the others leaving,
these twelve disciples made a conscious
choice to stay with Jesus.
Of course it had to be Peter who became
the spokesman for the group.

Simon Peter's relationship with Jesus
is one of the most powerful examples
of a disciple's life which is filled with highs and lows.
There is very little middle ground with Peter.

He is either at the top of the mountain ahead of the class
with brilliant insight into who Jesus is and why he has come –
or he is hitting bottom,
reaching new lows with his foot in his mouth.
That is why I love Peter.
But if Peter is anything, he is in with all his heart.
That is crucial .
Where is your heart?
He may be a frail follower,
but he does not hold back.

When the nominal followers leave,
Jesus asks if Peter and the rest will also leave.
“Lord to whom shall we go?”
What other teacher are we to follow?
What scribe, what rabbi, what priest can show us
words of life like you have shown us?
Peter does not identify Jesus as a good
or even great teacher or the greatest social worker
who ever crossed the face of the earth.
This is "*The Holy One of God.*"

If the crowd had trouble with Jesus
saying he was the bread of life,
the words Peter spoke came dangerously close
to the words of Isaiah 43:3.
Through the Prophet Isaiah God says to Israel:
*"For I am the LORD your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior."
It was all coming together.*

Peter identifies Jesus as the Savior of Israel,
the One who came to redeem the world.
With these words,
Peter expresses the faith of the whole
Body of Christ throughout the ages.

Second, they made an informed choice.
“Lord, to whom shall we go?
You have the words of eternal life.”
Never before had they heard anyone speak as Jesus spoke.
The words that Jesus spoke had penetrated their hearts.
Those words had convicted them of their sin,
and convinced them of forgiveness and truth, and life.

They didn't know everything yet.
In fact they still had no
understanding of the coming cross.
They had no idea yet that their salvation
would cost Jesus His life.
But they believed that Jesus' words came
from God and that they were true words.

Third, they made a deliberate choice.
"And we believe and know that you are the Christ,
the Son of the living God."
It was no small thing for them to embrace the one
whom the Scribes and the Pharisees,
and the Priests and the Elders were rejecting.
To stand with Jesus when everyone else
was leaving was no small choice.
To stand with Jesus when he made such difficult claims
like "Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man
and drink his blood, you have no life in you",
was a monstrous step of faith.

Somehow they understood the spiritual
meaning of those words,
when the rest understood them literally and were offended.
They had stage four thinking.
But they believed that this was the Messiah,
promised in the scriptures.
They may not have understood everything about him,
but they believed that he was the Son of God,
and when he talked about coming down from heaven,
they were beginning to grasp the fact
that he was claiming to be God come to earth.

No, even if everyone else left,
they would stay with him.
It was a deliberate choice to follow Jesus,
no matter what!

Last they made a costly choice.
They had no idea yet how costly the choice would be.
They did not yet know that it would cost Jesus his life.
They had no idea that this choice would cost
every one of them their own lives.
As yet all they understood was that it
meant staying true to him,
even if everyone else did drift away.

A woman came into a hardware store
and asked the storekeeper to cut her a key.
After she paid for the new key,
the woman went home to try it out.
She came back to the store four times
without successfully getting a new key to open her door.

The fourth time,
the storekeeper told her that he was stumped;
there was nothing else he could do
to make a key fit her door.
The woman replied: "O well, the original, master key
doesn't open the door either!"
Life is like that too.

If we become disciples of false teachers or masters,
we will end up getting lost and
travelling down dangerous, destructive, evil roads.
However, if we become disciples of Jesus,
our true Master, he shall lead us out of our lostness
and down roads of righteousness, goodness and love.

He was their true Master Key;
he would be able to open the door
and bring them into the Father's kingdom.
Another key is growing in our faith through
bible study, small groups, the other spiritual disciplines
like prayer and solitude.

Writer Joseph Smith said
The issue always is whether we are willing
to take Jesus as He is, or whether we repackage Him
to suit our own preferences.

Some of us want a Jesus who is a patsy,
not too tough, not too clear, not too demanding,
not too anything, bland and blah.

We want a Jesus who is easy,
who makes no demands,
who doesn't strain the brain.
Anything more is too difficult,
and we're out of here.

But not only do people pick the easy way,

there are many who are just plain indifferent to life.
"In his play A Thousand Clowns,
Herb Gardner has a scene in which Arnold,
the conformist who has sold his soul for \$30,000 a year
says of himself to his brother Murray,
who hasn't sold out yet:

"I'm willing to deal with the available world,
and I do not choose to shake it up, but to live with it.
There's the people who spill things
and the people who get spilled upon.
I do not choose to notice the stain, Murray."

Jesus calls his followers to notice the stain.
Jesus calls his followers to take the difficult path,
will you forsake me for the easy life,
Jesus asks his disciples, will you forsake me
for fame, for riches, for indifference?

Or will you follow me in a life which calls
for sacrifice, service, love, involvement and growth?
Does our relationship with him come before everything else in life?
Does our relationship with Jesus come before
our material success?, does it come before being the most popular?
does it come before winning?
Does our relationship with Jesus help us to be able to sacrifice,
to say loud and clear that I love Jesus more than anything?

Peter said, Lord, to whom shall we go?
You have the words of eternal life;"
What do you say today? Amen.