

John 6: 56-69

IF YOU'VE EVER DASHED INTO THE GROCERY STORE TO PICK UP A TUBE OF TOOTHPASTE, YOU'VE LIKELY BEEN STOPPED IN YOUR TRACKS BY THE VARIETY OF OPTIONS. THERE ARE AT LEAST MORE THAN A DOZEN BRANDS, EACH ONE PRESENTING SEVERAL DIFFERENT SPECIALITIES OF CLEANING ABILITY: ANTI-CAVITY, WHITENING, BETTER BREATH AND HEALTHIER GUMS. ADD TO THAT THE DIFFERENT COSTS, FLAVORS AND COLORS, AND BEFORE YOU KNOW IT, AN EMPLOYEE IS ASKING YOU TO MAKE YOUR WAY TO THE REGISTERS SO THE STORE CAN CLOSE.

OUR GOAL IS TO MAKE THE "PERFECT" CHOICE. I SEE THIS ALL THE TIME IN MY EXPLORATORY STUDIES CLASSES WITH FRESHMEN WHO ARE UNDECIDED ABOUT CHOOSING A MAJOR AND THEY ARRIVE WITH THE WEIGHT OF THE WORLD ON THEIR SHOULDERS. THEY ARE SO AFRAID THEY WILL MAKE THE WRONG CHOICE.

THE DECISION MAKING PROCESS ISN'T EASY IS IT? AND YET BOTH OUR OLD TESTAMENT LESSON AND OUR GOSPEL READING MAKE IT CLEAR, CHOICE MATTERS. "*CHOOSE THIS DAY WHOM YOU WILL SERVE,*" JOSHUA TELLS THE ISRAELITES AS THEY PRESENT THEMSELVES BEFORE GOD. CHOOSE *THIS* DAY. HERE. NOW.

"DO YOU WANT TO GO AWAY?" JESUS ASKS HIS DISCIPLES AS PEOPLE TAKE OFFENSE AT HIS TEACHINGS AND ABANDON HIM. NOW THE STAKES HAVE GONE UP. JESUS HAS SAID THE SHOCKING THING. THE SEEMINGLY IMPOSSIBLE THING. "*THOSE WHO EAT MY FLESH AND DRINK MY BLOOD ABIDE IN ME AND I IN THEM.*" "*WHOEVER EATS ME WILL LIVE BECAUSE OF ME.*" THIS IS THE FORK IN THE ROAD. IT'S TIME TO CHOOSE.

IN OTHER WORDS, THESE ARE PASSAGES ABOUT *REAL* CHOICES. NOT TOOTHPASTE CHOICES...NOT EVEN WHAT SHOULD I MAJOR IN CHOICES BUT CHOICES WITH REAL CONSEQUENCES.

IT'S TEMPTING FOR US TO WRITE OFF THOSE WHO GAVE UP ON JESUS AS PEOPLE TOO LAZY OR UNFAITHFUL TO BELIEVE. BUT NOTE THAT JOHN CALLS THESE FOLKS NOT SIMPLY "THE CROWDS," AS IN EARLIER PASSAGES, BUT RATHER "DISCIPLES." THE PEOPLE IN TODAY'S GOSPEL READING WHO NOW DESERT JESUS ARE PRECISELY THOSE WHO *HAD*, IN FACT, BELIEVED IN JESUS, THOSE WHO *HAD* FOLLOWED HIM AND HAD GIVEN UP SO MUCH TO DO SO. BUT NOW, FINALLY, AFTER ALL THEIR WAITING AND WATCHING AND WONDERING AND WORRYING, THEY HAVE GROWN TIRED, AND THEY CAN NO LONGER SEE CLEARLY WHAT IT WAS ABOUT JESUS THAT ATTRACKED THEM TO HIM IN THE FIRST PLACE, AND SO THEY LEAVE. WHO CAN BLAME THEM?

ARE WE ALL THAT DIFFERENT? WHICH OF US HAS NOT AT ONE TIME OR ANOTHER WONDERED WHETHER WE HAVE BELIEVED IN VAIN? DURING THE DARK NIGHT, PERHAPS WATHCING AND PRAYING BY THE BEDSIDE OF A LOVED ONE IN THE HOSPITAL, WONDERING WHY THEY ARE SO SICK AND WHETHER THEY'LL EVER RECOVER. OR THINKING ABOUT YOUR FAMILY..SO FULL OF ILL-WILL AND SQUABBLING WITH ONE ANOTHER, AND YOU WONDER WHY THINGS DIDN'T TURN OUT THE WAY YOU HOPED.

AT THESE TIMES, IF WE'RE HONEST WITH OURSELVES, AREN'T WE TEMPTED TO QUESTION THE PROMISES WE TRUSTED? WE DON'T WALK AWAY FROM JESUS OPENLY, WE JUST DON'T MAKE THE EXTRA EFFORT TO GET TO CHURCH REGULARLY, OR WE REDUCE WHAT WE GIVE, ARE MORE RELUCTANT TO HELP OTHERS, OR SIMPLY STOP PRAYING UNTIL, IN THE END, WE END UP JUST LIKE THE DISCIPLES IN TODAY'S READING.

THERE ARE TWO AMAZING AND PARADOXICAL TRUTHS IN TODAY'S STORIES: ONE, THAT GOD HAS ALREADY CHOSEN US. AND TWO, THAT WE ARE *THEREFORE* INVITED TO CHOOSE (OR NOT CHOOSE) GOD IN RETURN, NOT ONCE OR TWICE, BUT OVER AND OVER AND OVER AGAIN.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO CHOOSE GOD? NEITHER JOSHUA NOR JESUS TAKE PAINS TO MAKE CHOOSING GOD EASY. IF ANYTHING, THEY MAKE IT *HARDER*. JOSHUA EXPLAINS IN NO UNCERTAIN TERMS WHAT A COVENANT WITH GOD REQUIRES. "IF YOU'D RATHER WORSHIP THE IDOLS OF YOUR ANCESTORS, GO FOR IT," HE TELLS HIS LISTENERS. "BECAUSE THE LIFE YAHWEH/GOD CALLS YOU TO IS NO JOKE. HE MEANS BUSINESS."

LIKewise, JESUS DOESN'T ARGUE BACK OR MAKE EXCUSES WHEN HIS FOLLOWERS TAKE OFFENSE AND DEEM HIS TEACHINGS "TOO HARD." HE NEVER OFFERS THEM AN OPTION FOR BEGINNERS OR JESUS FOR DUMMIES. NO, HE LETS THEM WANDER OFF WITH THEIR QUESTIONS UNANSWERED AND THEIR DOUBTS UNRESOLVED. WHY? BECAUSE HE'S NOT SO MUCH USER-FRIENDLY AS HE IS UNFLINCHINGLY HONEST. THIS TEACHING IS HARD. IT'S GLORIOUS, IT'S LIFE-GIVING, IT'S BLESSED, BUT IT'S *HARD*.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO CHOOSE GOD? ACCORDING TO JESUS, IT MEANS EATING HIS VERY ESSENCE, TAKING THE INCARNATION SO DEEPLY INTO OUR OWN BODIES AND SOULS THAT WE EXUDE THE FLAVOR OF CHRIST TO THE WORLD. IT MEANS DOING WHAT JESUS DID AND LIVING AS JESUS LIVED. IT MEANS TURNING THE OTHER CHEEK. 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 LAST AND THE LAST FIRST. IT MEANS DENYING OURSELVES. IT MEANS THE CROSS.

HONESTLY, IT'S STUNNING THAT JESUS HAD ANY FOLLOWERS LEFT. "DO YOU ALSO WANT TO GO AWAY?" THERE'S SOMETHING SO VULNERABLE ABOUT THAT QUESTION. I IMAGINE JESUS ASKING SADLY, BUT WITH COMPASSION AND UNDERSTANDING. HE KNOWS FULL WELL WHAT HE'S ASKING OF HIS FOLLOWERS, AND HE WANTS THEM TO KNOW THAT HIS LOVE IS A FREEING LOVE. THEY'RE FREE TO WALK AWAY. THAT'S TEMPTING. WE DO WANT TO WALK AWAY SOMETIMES. WE WANT TO BE COMFORTABLE. TO PICK AN EASIER, LESS DEMANDING, LESS COSTLY VERSION OF THE GOSPEL. BUT HERE'S THE DEAL: THAT VERSION DOESN'T EXIST. IT DOESN'T. AS PETER RIGHTLY RESPONDS TO JESUS, "LORD, TO WHOM WOULD WE GO? YOU HAVE THE WORDS OF ETERNAL LIFE."

LOVE PETER! BOLD, BRASH PETER DOESN'T SHOUT A SPIRIT-FILLED "NO!" TO JESUS'S QUESTION. HE DOESN'T OFFER A YES OR NO. HE JUST RESPONDS WITH A QUESTION OF HIS OWN. NOT AN ENTHUSIASTIC, FLATTERING QUESTION. A SEARCHING ONE. "LORD, WHAT ARE THE ALTERNATIVES? YOUR TEACHINGS ARE HARD, BUT THEY HAVE LIFE IN THEM. IF

YOU TRULY ARE WHO YOU SAY ARE, WHY WOULD WE CHOOSE DEATH WHEN LIFE IS RIGHT HERE, IN YOUR WORDS, IN YOUR BODY, IN THE FOOD YOU'RE ASKING US TO EAT? YOU ARE LIFE ITSELF. TO WHOM ELSE WOULD WE GO? WHAT ELSE IS THERE BUT YOU?

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO CHOOSE GOD? CAN YOU REMEMBER WHEN YOU FIRST MADE A CONSCIOUS DECISION TO CHOOSE GOD? CHOOSE CHRIST? I ATTENDED MY FIRST CHURCH CAMP WITH MY BEST FRIEND, KIM, WHEN I WAS IN 3RD GRADE AND AFTER THAT EXPERIENCE I WANTED TO READ THE BIBLE BUT MY FAMILY DIDN'T OWN ONE..NOT A SINGLE BIBLE IN MY HOME. THE NEIGHBORHOOD GIRLS EACH HAD ONE...GIVEN TO THEM BY PARENTS OR THEIR CHURCH, I YEARNED TO HAVE ONE. I SAVED MY ALLOWANCE AND BOUGHT MY FIRST BIBLE..A CHILDREN'S BIBLE. BUT WHAT WOULD I WRITE ON THAT FRONT PAGE? I COULDN'T WRITE THAT I GAVE IT TO MYSELF, SO I LIED AND PENNED THAT IT WAS GIFT FROM MY RELATIVES. FAST FORWARD TO MY FRESHMAN YEAR IN HIGH SCHOOL AND ANOTHER EXPERIENCE AT CHURCH CAMP. THIS TIME I WANTED A MORE "MATURE" BIBLE, SO I SAVED MY MONEY AND BOUGHT A NEW BIBLE AND THIS TIME ON THE INSIDE PAGE, I WROTE: TO ME; FROM ME." GOD CHOSE ME AND I CHOSE GOD.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO CHOOSE GOD? WHAT HAS IT MEANT TO YOU IN THE PAST, AND WHAT DOES IT MEAN RIGHT NOW? IT'S A QUESTION WE MUST KEEP ASKING OURSELVES, BECAUSE THE CHOICE NEVER GOES AWAY. CHOOSE *THIS* DAY. AND *THIS* DAY. AND THE DAY AFTER THAT. KEEP CHOOSING, BECAUSE GOD HAS CHOSEN. HE ALWAYS CHOOSES US. HE ALWAYS CHOOSES YOU. TODAY IT'S YOUR TURN.