

**Series: The Questions Lent Asks**

**Today: The Commitment Question: Do You Wish To Go Away, Too?**

**Text: John 6:60-71**

**A Communion Meditation preached by the Rev. Randolph T. Riggs, D.Min.  
Sunday, April 3, 2011 (Fourth Sunday in Lent)  
First Presbyterian Church of Lancaster, PA**

At our Early Word Bible Study, our Theologian in Residence, Jack Houdeshel, regularly reminds us that a sermon text which is taken out of context is nothing but a pretext. So before I read our lesson for this morning, I would like to offer the context in which it is set.

The theme of the sixth chapter of John is bread. The chapter begins with the feeding of 5,000 with five loaves of bread and two fish. Once Jesus has performed this miracle, the crowd wanted to make him King, and he withdrew to a mountain to be by himself. In the evening Jesus performs a second miracle. He calms the sea. These two miracles brings a crowd of people who say they want to follow him, but he warns them that a faith that will last has to be based on something more than miracles.

He uses an Old Testament reference to remind them that of the difference between a faith based on miracles and a faith based in the providence of God's grace. He tells them that it was God who gave bread to the Israelites when they were wandering in the desert, and it is God who gave bread to the 5,000 as they waited to be fed. Faith which will last has to be based on more than miracles. Faith that will get them through the tough times which are ahead has to be in God's faithfulness; a faithfulness which is shown in miracles but which is more than miracles. Faith that will last has to be in God who has come to them in human form; in flesh and blood. Faith that will last is about relationship with the living God who revealed himself in Jesus of Nazareth whom we call the Christ; the son of the living God. Jesus is the bread of life on which

we can feed. Jesus is the cup of salvation from which we can drink. Whoever eats this bread will live forever.

There were many who heard what Jesus said who could not wrap their minds around it. They believed in God. They believed in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, but they could not believe that Jesus was the son of God; that it would be his death that would open the door which had been slammed shut in the Garden of Eden and provide them with a way that they could have the same intimate relationship that Adam and Eve had with God before they sinned. This is the context of our scripture. Now listen for the Word of God. **John 6:60-71:**

*<sup>60</sup> On hearing it, many of his disciples said, "This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?" <sup>61</sup> Aware that his disciples were grumbling about this, Jesus said to them, "Does this offend you? <sup>62</sup> Then what if you see the Son of Man ascend to where he was before! <sup>63</sup> The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you—they are full of the Spirit<sup>[a]</sup> and life. <sup>64</sup> Yet there are some of you who do not believe;" for Jesus had known from the beginning which of them did not believe and who would betray him. <sup>65</sup> He went on to say, "This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless the Father has enabled them."*

*<sup>66</sup> From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him. <sup>67</sup> "You do not want to leave too, do you?" Jesus asked the Twelve.*

*<sup>68</sup> Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. <sup>69</sup> We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God."*

*<sup>70</sup> Then Jesus replied, "Have I not chosen you, the Twelve? Yet one of you is a devil <sup>1</sup>He meant Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot, who, though one of the Twelve, was later to betray him.)*

**Let us pray: Now may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be found acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.**

So here we are on the fourth Sunday in Lent with only three weeks to go until Easter, and we come upon the discipleship question. Jesus has been deserted by the throngs, who had been intrigued by the miracle worker, and there are only the 12 left; the 12 he had called to follow him. And Jesus turns and asks them: *Do you also wish to go away?*

It is a piercing question. It must have made them uncomfortable. Most of them had left family, friends, everything that was familiar and had set their course to follow him. Why would

he ask them such a question? He knew at least one of them would wind up a traitor. Were there others who showed signs of wavering?

Soren Kierkegaard, Danish philosopher and theologian, once said, *“If you have any knowledge at all of human nature, you know that those who only admire the truth will, when danger appears, become traitors. The admirer is infatuated with the false security of greatness; but if there is any inconvenience or trouble, he pulls back. Admiring the truth, instead of following it, is just as dubious a fire as the fire of erotic love, which at the turn of the hand can be changed into exactly the opposite—to hate, jealousy, and revenge. Christ never asked for admirers, worshipers, or adherents, however. He consistently spoke of “followers” and “disciples.”*

Which are we? Are we admirers, worshipers, adherents? Or during this Lenten season are we coming closer to being followers; disciples of Jesus Christ?

There is a major shift taking place in our culture today. People are moving away from institutional religion. Among the findings released in 2009 from the American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS), one stood out. The percentage of Americans claiming "no religion" almost doubled in about two decades, climbing from 8.1 percent in 1990 to 15 percent in 2008.

The trend wasn't confined to one region. Those marking "no religion," called the "Nones," made up the only group to have grown in every state, from the secular Northeast to the conservative Bible Belt. The Nones were most numerous among the young: a whopping 22 percent of 18- to 29-year-olds claimed no religion, up from 11 percent in 1990. The study also found that 73 percent of Nones came from religious homes; 66 percent were described by the study as "de-converts."

Other survey results have been grimmer. At the May 2009 Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, top political scientists Robert Putnam and David Campbell presented research from their book *American Grace*, released last year. They reported that "*young Americans are dropping out of religion at an alarming rate of five to six times the historic rate (30 to 40 percent have no religion today, versus 5 to 10 percent a generation ago).*" [Source: Drew Dyck, "*The Leavers*," *Christianity Today* (November, 2010), p. 40.]

Which are you? Are you an admirer, worshiper, adherent? Or during this Lenten season are you coming closer to being a follower; a disciple of Jesus Christ?

Being a follower or a disciple of Jesus Christ requires that you not be just an observer of his life. It implies a relationship; the kind of relationship which changes the way you see the world. If you will allow me, I am going to break the cardinal rule of preaching for the second week in a row and talk about a member of my family who has helped me to understand this from a different perspective.

My wife and I have been married for 41 years. Now I know that is a mere drop in the bucket compared to the number of years some of you have put in, but I hope you will agree that 41 years of being in a relationship is a significant number.

I am here to testify today that I would not be the person I am today if it were not for the relationship I have had with my wife. Like many of you, I am a child of a divorced family, and in that family I received many mixed messages about what it means to make commitments and to keep them. So when I met her, I had lots of baggage to unpack which she has helped me to unpack over the last 41 years.

It is she that has taught me the meaning of unconditional love by the way she has loved me. It is she that has helped me to be faithful to the commitments I make because she has been

faithful to her commitment to me. When I wasn't sure I wanted to have children because I didn't want to them to feel the confusion I felt in my family, it was she who was patient with me and helped me to see that I could be a good father offering them the kind of love I longed to receive from my own parents. When we experienced the impact of my family's disease of alcoholism in our own family, it was she who took me in her arms and forgave me and gave me hope that I didn't have to be a victim of that disease like my father was; that I could recover and use it to help others recover. My relationship with my wife has shaped the man that I have become today, and I want to give her the credit she deserves. She has always been the face of Jesus for me.

This is the kind of intimacy that Jesus invites his disciples to experience every time they break the bread and share the cup. He invites us to be shaped and changed by the love of God which this table represents. He tells them that as they receive the bread it will be like the manna in the wilderness which the Israelites received when they were not sure if God was still with them. It will be a sign and a promise of God's presence in their lives. And every time they drink the cup they will remember the words of the Seder meal that this is the cup of salvation shed for the remission of their sins. It will remind them that there is nothing in life or in death that can separate them from the love of God. It too will be a sign and a promise of God's presence in their lives.

*Do you also wish to go away?* It is the discipleship question which Jesus asks of his followers. Are you willing to stay with him? Are you willing to allow him to shape and influence your life and your decisions? Are you willing to walk with him all the way to the cross? If so, he has something for you today: His body broken and his blood shed; food for the journey of faith.