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8/22/21—University Presbyterian Church
John 6:56-69

WHERE ELSE?

For the past 5 weeks, the lectionary has taken us passage by passage through the entirety of chapter 6 of John's gospel. And we notice a significant change of circumstances between the way chapter 6 begins and the way chapter 6 ends. Way back at the beginning of chapter 6, we saw Jesus surrounded by an enthusiastic crowd of five thousand, a crowd of supporters who witnessed Jesus perform the miracle with the loaves and fish, who ate their fill of the food, and who literally chased after Jesus when he traveled back across the Sea of Galilee to the other side. But today, here at the *end* of this very same chapter, things have taken a dramatic turn. The crowds have thinned out and Jesus' followers are bailing on him right and left.

The problem lies with Jesus' teachings. Many of his followers found Jesus' teachings too difficult to accept. Like the teaching we hear Jesus offer today where he talked about how his followers needed to eat his flesh and drink his blood. Sounds awfully creepy! Many of his disciples found this teaching too offensive. Were his disciples unable to grasp the metaphor-- that Jesus was *not* talking about cannibalism but rather he was speaking metaphorically about sustaining ourselves on his way and his teachings, and taking him into our hearts and souls? Did they not understand the metaphor? Or maybe they understood the metaphor but didn't want to accept the implied *message*, that following Jesus would entail costly sacrifice. Either way, the disciples didn't like his teaching and many of them walked away.

No doubt you have been stopped short by some of Jesus' difficult teachings. Which one is the hardest for you? Is it the demand that we love our enemies? Or that we turn the other

cheek or go the extra mile? Is the lesson that we forgive others seventy times seven? Or that it is harder for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle? Do Jesus' stories about God's radical grace upset you—like the prodigal son who disrespected his family and squandered the family money but was still welcomed home with love? Or the story about the laborers who worked only one hour who received the same wage as those who worked all day? Are you bothered by Jesus' words about no one coming to the Father except through him? Most of us have likely encountered teachings of Jesus that we do not like, and we may find ourselves joining those early disciples in declaring, "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?" Jesus doesn't make it easy to follow him. Maybe the most remarkable thing given how challenging his teachings were, is that Jesus had *any* followers at all at the end of his life.

When Jesus sees so many of his disciples fleeing from him, he asks the twelve original disciples, "Do you also wish to go away?" I wonder if there might not be a bit of exasperation in Peter's response to Jesus. Can't you imagine Peter heaving a heavy sigh and saying to Jesus, "Lord, we don't understand you any better than the others did! But where else can we go?"

Where else can we go?

Peter's answer is hardly an unequivocal proclamation of faith. To Jesus' question, "Do you also wish to go away?" Peter doesn't say yes but he doesn't say no either. And that makes his response relatable for a lot of us. Who among us understands everything Jesus teaches us? When pain and tragedy are dumped in our laps as they will be in life, many of us find ourselves with whole lot of unanswered questions about God and Jesus and the life of faith.

Through the classes I have taught and the discussions I have had with church members in the various churches I have served over the years, I have discovered that the faith beliefs of church members are all over the map. Some claim to believe in every single word of the Bible. Others among us barely believe in God. And yet, here we are. We keep showing up. We keep hanging in there with Jesus even when we don't completely understand Jesus.

Where else could we go? For, as Peter declares to Jesus, "You have the words of eternal life." Jesus shows us the path to lasting life.

The way of Jesus does not offer us clear answers to the big question "why." Why is there suffering? Why did my son die? Why could a loving God permit genocides? We do not get satisfactory answers to our big question "why" from Christianity. But I don't know any religious traditions that do. And when spiritual leaders and teachers *do* attempt to give answers to our "why" questions—such as, it was God's will, it was meant to be, it was her time—the answers usually ring hollow, and shallow, and even terribly cruel and insensitive. And they raise even bigger questions like, "what kind of a God could will such tragedy and horror?"

The way of Jesus may never satisfy our question why, but where else could we go? The way of nihilism, which maintains that life is meaningless? Or the way of cynicism—where people and their motives are generally distrusted? Or the way of consumerism—where life is focused on acquiring things and experiences? Or the way of self-interest and self-promotion, where the individual is the center of meaning? None of these ways will offer us lasting life.

Some people in their quest for a meaningful way in life, center their attention on the family. Devotion to the family becomes their "way," their reason for living, their source of meaning. And families can indeed one of God's great blessings to us. But let us consider whether the family alone is a sufficient path to lasting life. Families are made up of human

beings, flawed human beings, human beings who will disappoint, and fail, and wound, and who will ultimately leave us whether by death or by choice. What about people who don't have families or those who have terribly broken families or who were deeply wounded by their families? If family is the path toward lasting life, what can be offered to such people as these? Or are they just out of luck?

The way of Jesus will not shield us from life's tragedies or give us satisfactory answers for the "why" of life's pain, but neither will any of the other ways we may turn to as substitutes. What the way of Jesus offers us is an enduring, purpose-filled life even and especially in the midst of life's tragedies.

Here is a little sampling of what the lasting way of Jesus looks like:

The way of Jesus cherishes the family but blows apart its narrow boundaries to include the outcasts and the excluded and the forgotten.

The way of Jesus protects the weak and the vulnerable.

The way of Jesus offers mercy to the broken and second chances to the imperfect.

The way of Jesus stands against tyranny and oppression and cruelty and selfishness.

The way of Jesus extends radical generosity and compassion.

The way of Jesus believes that humans can rise to great heights when we live in humility and service to one another.

The way of Jesus maintains that God loves us, every one of us—that God loves you no matter what.

And this way, this unconventional way, this hard and challenging way, is what Peter knew offered lasting life.

So here we are—with all of our skepticism, with all of our questions and doubts, with all of our pain and uncertainties, living amidst all of life's ambiguities—here we are gathered once again in this time and place of worship because the way of Jesus will not let us go. Where else could we go but to the Source of Life, to the heart of love, and to the well of abundant mercy?