**August 26, 2018**

**John 6:22-71; Ephesians 6:10-20**

I’ve noticed that we all take note when a Christian actually does what they say they believe. Like little prairie dogs, we stand up a little taller to see what’s happening over there; we pay attention when a Christian lives into their faith. Sometimes it even makes secular headline news. Former Pres. Jimmy Carter holds Americans accountable to his Christian faith. Recently in an interview with *The Washington Post[[1]](#footnote-1)* he said that “Money is now preeminent” over truth, and has sent our political system “to hell.” Instead, he hopes that America will reclaim our sense of right and wrong, decency, and truth. In one of his recent books, Faith: A Journey for All, Carter asked, “What is the proper response from people of faith when there is an obvious disparity between our government’s policies and our religious beliefs?” He then answered his own question by saying that “civil disobedience is in order when human laws are contrary to God’s demand.”[[2]](#footnote-2) So he practices civil disobedience in his own respectful ways, working for peace (sometimes in direct opposition to political leadership) and speaking against behaviors that are contrary to the teachings of Jesus Christ. People watch him; they take notes, being inspired by his indefatigable energy and commitment to both his faith and his country.

Another southerner was pushed into the headlines this spring for doing an uncommonly good deed. Rachel Newberry invited her friend, Ben Robinson, go to the prom. Ben has Down Syndrome. *CBS Sunday Morning* published their story in May[[3]](#footnote-3), remarking on how many people heard their story and thought that Rachel was just being kind. But she wasn’t being kind. She invited Ben because they were best friends. Truly. Their years of friendship made her blind to the blemishes others see in his disabilities. Rachel simply wanted to have a fun night with her best friend.

Just this week after Mollie Tibbitts was discovered to have been murdered by an illegal immigrant, some politicians pointed to her case as a reason for strict deportation and limitation of immigration into the United States. Mollie’s family members, however, stood up in opposition to that response. Her aunt stated online that, “Evil comes in EVERY color,” discouraging people from letting this horrific situation determine our national immigration policies or enforcement thereof.[[4]](#footnote-4)

These three very different situations show people who were and are able to do amazing, outrageous, generous, bold things because they understand that following Jesus has implications. They live into the faith they profess on good days and hard days. They enact Jesus’ teaching to love God and our neighbors. They experience the blessedness of being merciful, and of hungering and seeking righteousness. The rest of us stand around these saints in awe, wondering why is it so easy for *them*? How can we be more like that? But instead of following their example, we tend to repeat the disciples’ questions here in John’s gospel, saying, “Christ’s teaching is difficult. Who can accept it?”

Christ’s teaching is difficult. Who can accept it? Following Jesus isn’t just about being nice. Following Jesus doesn’t make your life easy or your days sunny and cheery. If someone started following Jesus simply because they were attracted to how Jesus could help them, they are in for a big surprise. Christianity is not about achieving self-satisfaction. President Carter lives in his normal American home – costing less than $200,000 – intentionally avoiding the pitfalls of personal wealth and fame. Mollie Tibbitts’ family are suffering the depths of grief without succumbing to self-gratifying retribution. They understand that Christianity is about forsaking one’s self, suffering, and living a life that benefits God and creation. They understand that the Christian way of life is not a ticket to constant euphoria. And contrary to other religions, Christianity is not movement to perfection or one-ness with a higher being. Faithful Christians understand that we are a community of equally broken people, equally needing God’s grace, equally receiving God’s grace.

In our highly commercialized culture, these are not great promotional lines. People want to do what’s nice and pleasant and easy, not what’s uncomfortable and difficult. This is a problem if you want to grow the church. How do you sell people on something that isn’t ‘just for fun’, or that isn’t all about you, or really anything about you? “Christ’s teaching is difficult. Who can accept it?”

Those of us who work in the church today have become obsessed with the statistics and demographics of declining church membership and attendance. We do a lot of soul-searching about changing attendance. We are constantly researching and brainstorming how we can better attract more people to our services – people with time, people with energy, people with children. We talk about it at Sweet Hollow every week and every church officers’ meeting. And I am sure that there are things we could do to make ourselves more relevant to the current population in Melville and Huntington.

On the other hand, I also wonder if Christ’s *difficult* teachings are simply too much for people. Who *can* accept it?[[5]](#footnote-5) Throughout Christian history, following Jesus has been and will likely always be a minority enterprise. From the first century through the Middle Ages and forward the majority of the Christianity population has gone to church once or twice a year (usually during Lent and Holy Week). The majority of members never give a full 10% tithe to church. Most people follow Jesus when it is convenient to them. People draw near to Jesus’ promise of eternal life, then back away when the conversation moves to discipleship and Christian living. No one wants to deny themselves, take up our cross and follow him. So these disciples in John’s gospel were honest and quite human when they said: “’This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?’… Then many of them turned back and no longer went about with him.”

Following Jesus entails risk. It means signing on to some values that push deeply against the culture. It involves a willingness to stand with people who can do nothing for you – the poor, the lonely, the persecuted. Following Jesus asks that you find fulfillment not on your own, but in mutuality and communion with others. That in itself is risky behavior for many people. Sure, “when the going gets tough, the tough get going,” but also “when the going gets tough, the weak get going.” There are a lot of fair-weather friends. Only the strongest have the grit to stick it out beyond boredom and discomfort and questions and suffering. To stand against the tide, speak out, and hold tightly to faith is a price that many are unwilling to pay. This is the cost of discipleship. In a self-serving culture, other friends and neighbors will be confused and offended by what we stand for. They won’t understand why our life is centered around love and justice and discipleship; not around self-aggrandizement.

In this particular passage, the specific difficulties they struggled with were around Christ’s cannibalistic language. Ever since it was written, Christians have struggled with the *difficulties* in Christ’s forward-thinking eucharistic theology. Time would be well spent on the numerous heresies and theological tomes connected to this passage. It deserves our attention, but I would like to push past, acknowledging that sharing the bread of life is not *just* about sharing the benefits of God’s company – in heaven or on earth. Eating Christ’s body and drinking his blood is directly connected to what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called “the cost of discipleship.”

Discipleship is a holistic way of living – our whole hearts and bodies and minds and souls. Bonhoeffer wrote, “At the very moment of our call, [people] find that they have already broken with the natural ties of life,” so that our sole focus falls away from the natural human priorities of work and family and income and moves onto God and Christ’s teaching. We are no longer focused on keeping up with the Kardashians or the Joneses, but thinking of God’s word and Christ’s commandments above all else. “Every moment and every situation challenges us to action and to obedience.” Christian discipleship is not a create-your-own-adventure or salad bar from which we can choose only our favorite elements. Christian discipleship is an invitation to holy living in all regards, requiring changes from the natural way of human life, and likely differences from our friends and neighbors. Christian discipleship is difficult. Not many can accept it.

Let me encourage each of you, and all of us, to then hold loosely to those pieces of scripture that we can’t understand. Hold loosely to those things that don’t make sense. Don’t let these *difficulties* be your excuse to complain or walk away. Discipleship is not meant to be a chore (though it is hard word). We will never get it right. We will never understand it all. Even John Calvin, after a long dissertation, said of the Lord's Supper, "I would rather experience it than understand it." Indeed, I think that we are not meant to understand it all, though we are meant to experience it all. That is where we find the grace. Right at the heart of our confusion and failure, Jesus Christ calls us to keep coming. May we all experience God’s grace as we follow him through our questions and difficulties. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

1. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/national/wp/2018/08/17/feature/the-un-celebrity-president-jimmy-carter-shuns-riches-lives-modestly-in-his-georgia-hometown/?utm\_term=.673292d1b597 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. https://www.americamagazine.org/arts-culture/2018/04/11/faith-jimmy-carter [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. https://www.cbs.com/shows/cbs-sunday-morning/video/OAl\_4dOAz82\_tRPXR1dez4zUzyKYB\_0p/prom-friends/ [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. https://www.cnn.com/2018/08/23/us/mollie-tibbetts-iowa-student-death/index.html [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Very Rev. Gary Hall at the National Cathedral: <https://www.faithandleadership.com/gary-r-hall-following-jesus-will-always-be-minority-enterprise> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)