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1 Kings 8: 1, 6, 10 – 11, 22 – 30, 41 – 43  
 Ephesians 6: 10 – 20

Ps. 84  
 John 6: 56 – 69

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It had all started out so promising. Fifty-five verses ago, at the beginning of the sixth chapter of the Gospel of John, swelling crowds follow Jesus everywhere. So much so, that he cannot get a moment's peace. Everyone is talking about him. People like the things he is doing. People like what Jesus is doing for *them*. Like flies to honey, Jesus draws the sick and the suffering, the needy and the hungry, the powerful and the penniless, the sinful and the just plain curious. The sheer number of people has threatened to overwhelm Jesus and his little inner circle of friends and their resources, or so it has seemed by worldly standards. Jesus has been riding this wave of popular support, but it all comes crashing to an end as he starts saying all these 'hard things.'

Notice how Jesus never *sends* anyone away; it is always the person's choice to turn around and leave. Jesus' words hit some people where it hurts: some of them in their wallets and others in their throats where his words get stuck. Jesus' words are hard to swallow, hard to digest. Words like "gnaw my flesh and gulp my blood." Words like "Oh, does that offend you? Try this: what if you see me ascending into heaven where I was before? Try that on for size." People come to hear what Jesus has to say, but some of them turn on their heels and walk away before he's even finished speaking. Some of them drift away; some of them run. And really, can you blame them? What if any of us were to go to a meeting or a forum somewhere, and the speaker simply deconstructs and demolishes everything about the way we've been brought up to think? And instead, the speaker offers us a way of looking at the world – and everyone and everything in it – that is very compelling, but which would be extremely costly in turns of our current lifestyle and relationships and priorities. We might well find good reason to get up and leave and never go back.

You have to admit that Jesus elicits strong reactions from people. Even from us. C. S. Lewis notably wrote, "...[Jesus is] never regarded as a mere moral teacher. He does not produce that effect on any of the people who actually meet him. He produces mainly three effects: hatred, terror and adoration. There is no trace of people expressing mild disapproval."

So, by the time we get to the end of chapter six in John and today's reading, it is like the last few grains of sand remaining in an egg timer. Almost all of the crowd, all the other grains of sand, have run out. Only the inner circle seems to still be remaining. And we know that even two of them, Judas and Peter, will also betray Jesus, and most of the rest will not be at the foot of the cross. The group keeps getting smaller and smaller as the stakes for following Jesus get higher.

We shouldn't expect the inner circle to be immune from the same reactions as everyone else. Episcopal priest and author, Barbara Brown Taylor, writes that she hears such pathos in Peter's words. He is as offended as anyone by the crudeness, the vulgarity, and perhaps the seeming arrogance of what Jesus is saying and claiming. Of all the disciples, she writes, Peter, as usual, is the spokesperson who stands up for the traditional faith. He keeps the traditional Jewish dietary laws and never eats forbidden things – such as meat with blood in it. The idea of gnawing raw flesh and quaffing blood are as repulsive to him as to anyone else, including us. But where *can* he – or the others – really go?

Taylor goes on to say that as confusing and confounding as everything Jesus says is to Peter, Peter still has a seen a glimpse of something in Jesus from which he cannot turn away. Peter has seen

something of the true God in Jesus, and he knows it beyond a shadow of a doubt. So, if trusting in that means struggling with a whole lot of things that he can't understand, let alone swallow metaphorically or otherwise, then Peter – at this moment – is willing to struggle. He cannot – no, he will not, because it is, after all a choice – he will not let go of the life to which he has been led by this incredible (if sometimes difficult and strange) man.

The truth of the matter is that if we, like Peter, choose to stick with Jesus, with God, then there will always be things that offend us. Because God takes us to places where we would otherwise not choose to go. To follow Jesus is to choose a very costly way of life because it means choosing the way of the cross. And that cross will sometimes divide us from family and friends. What offends us may not be the part about 'eat my body and drink my blood' that we have so domesticated in the Eucharist. But chances are, it is whatever we (individually or collectively) have the most difficulty with in terms of following Jesus: whatever sticks in our craw, whatever we find ourselves wanting to rationalize or make metaphorical instead of literal, whatever of Jesus' words we have the most trouble swallowing. Maybe it's going and selling all that we own and giving the money to the poor. Maybe it's his teaching on adultery and divorce. Maybe it's forgiveness. Maybe it's getting the log out of our own eye first. Maybe it's about putting Jesus first before anyone else we love, and before even life itself. Maybe it's about becoming like a little child again in all their innocence and joy and wonder. Maybe it's in trying to accept Jesus without necessarily having to understand or make sense of who he really is. Or maybe it's that thing about unconditional love. All of which sound like so much folly to everyone around us who have better ways to spend their Sunday mornings, better things to do with their treasure than tithe, better things to do with their time than to use it to help the least of these in God's name – or so they think.

So, Jesus asks the twelve, "Do you also wish to go away?" "Lord, to whom *can* we go?" asks Peter with all that pathos, saying in effect, 'where else can we go?' Jesus offers Peter and all the others a choice. Stay or go. From the world's perspective, it would seem to be an easy choice to pick the safe harbor, staying where one has always been (Galilee), doing what one has always done (fishing), staying within the network of relationships and obligations that make up the life that one has always had. A safe choice. A comfortable choice. But for Peter and the others in this little circle, knowing what they know, having a little sliver of a glimmer of who Jesus is and what God is doing in and through him, it's really a no-brainer, despite the extraordinary cost in worldly terms. Because the world has no way of measuring, no clue, what is gained by following Jesus.

The question, however, "Do you also wish to go away?" never really does go away for Peter (or the others). He and they will face it again. And Peter *will* go away when he betrays Jesus by denying him three times. But Peter will also return. The question really never goes away for any of us either. Choosing to stay with Jesus is a decision we have to keep making over and over again on our journeys with Jesus. And the good news is that even when we, like Peter, turn away at some point, we are always welcomed back with open arms.

To follow Jesus is costly, no doubt about it. In fact, if we haven't felt a cost in one or more ways in our lives, perhaps we should question whether we really ARE following Jesus. Jesus doesn't just invite us to follow a nice little flowered garden path. Sometimes, following Jesus means going out on a limb. Sometimes it means stepping off a cliff. A life lived in Jesus is about taking risks, trusting God.

The Rev. Curtis Farr tells this story. In the 1940's, a young black woman invited her boyfriend to join her one Sunday at her Episcopal church. He was hesitant. He was also black and knew that his

girlfriend's congregation was mostly white. That might be an uncomfortable situation today for some, but imagine how dangerous that might have been seventy years ago. But he went.

When it came time for Holy Communion, the woman's boyfriend noticed that everyone drank from the same chalice - black people and white people, who were not allowed to share the same drinking fountains in public, were sharing a common cup to drink the sacramental wine. Nervously, he followed her to the communion rail and watched as she received the bread. The priest then lowered the chalice to her lips and said, "The Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, which was shed for thee, preserve thy body and soul unto everlasting life." [It was the 1928 BCP, after all.]

Absolutely stunned, the young man experienced the boundary-breaking, earthly rule-shattering, reconciling mission of the Living God. The young man drank the wine and was forever changed. This couple married and one of their children grew up to become our Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry.

Jesus invites us to take risks and to go places where we might not be comfortable. Where we might even be afraid. Where we are not in control. But God *is* in control. 'This is my body, this is my blood, do this in remembrance of me.' Take my life and let it become yours. Jesus invites us to live a Eucharistic life, embodying the bread and the wine, the body and the blood of Jesus, in this world. Living eucharistically enables us to share in the experience of our Living God, a Living God who breaks down walls and who reconciles. A Living God who calls us to a life of love and forgiveness. Living eucharistically challenges us to look for and recognize a glimmer of the Living God in every face we meet. Every face. Even the ones we don't like or don't trust. Living eucharistically challenges us to embrace one another as the gifts that God has created us to be. Living eucharistically means choosing to serve the Living God instead of the zillion other gods of this world that vie for our time, our money, our hearts, our very sense of being. Living eucharistically is costly, but, as they say, the rewards are out of this world. "Do you also wish to go away?" Jesus asks us. What shall we tell him? Where else CAN we go? +