

"Where Will YOU Go?"

John 6:51-69

August 19, 2012

13th Sunday After Pentecost

Recently, I finished reading a book entitled, *The Narcissism Epidemic*. In it, the authors state that their studies reveal that many Americans are narcissistic; that is, they love themselves and believe that the world should revolve around them, their needs and their desires. Many believe that they have a right to have their needs met and deserved to have many of the good things in life, regardless of whether they have deserved them or can afford them.

Many products are marketed to appeal to the narcissism in people. For example, it used to be that you went into a restaurant and ordered what they had to give you. Now, the slogan, "have it your way" is popular. It used to be that doctors were trusted to give us the medicines we need. Now, prescription medicines are advertised on television and we are urged to "ask your doctor if medicine XYZ is *right for you*."

Not only do we have the right to have products that are right for us and experience everything "our way," we are free to leave behind anything that displeases us, inconveniences us, or doesn't meet our wants and needs in the way we desire. We are free (and encouraged) to seek out something more to our liking, whether it be in the hamburger we eat, the medicine we take, or even the religion we profess. Many in today's world see narcissism as something good which shows strength and self-confidence. The Word of God teaches differently.

Eve was the first narcissist. She had one command from God: don't eat the fruit from the tree in the middle of the garden. She was happy with that for awhile. But when Satan told her that the fruit from the tree would meet her need to be more important (to be "like God") and when she saw that the fruit would please her desires (it was good for food and pleasing to the eye), Eve rejected the command of God and went after that which would meet her needs better and satisfy her desires more than God had.

The same was true in our Gospel reading for today. A great number of people had been attracted to Jesus because of His teaching and His miracles. They applauded when Jesus talked about the kingdom of heaven. They were happy with Jesus when He was healing sick people, casting out demons from those possessed, and feeding them when they were hungry. This was the kind of Messiah they were interested in – a bread king who would take care of their needs and satisfy their desires. After the feeding of the 5,000, they were going to try and make Jesus king by force so Jesus left and went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee (John 6:15). When they ran around to meet Him there, Jesus saw through their shallow, self-centered motivation. He said, “Truly, truly, I saw to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves.” (John 6:26)

Jesus began teaching them and they heard things they didn't like. Jesus told them to not be so interested in food like this that perishes, but in food that endures to eternal life (John 6:27). The people started to get uncomfortable.

Jesus went on to say that *He* was that food. He said, “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.” (John 6:51) This sounded pretty strange. Jesus would give His flesh for the life of the world? They thought life consisted of having needs met and pleasures satisfied, not in the flesh of this rabbi here.

Then Jesus said, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.” This was too much. They thought the way to the blessed life was in eating, drinking, and making merry, not in eating flesh and drinking blood.

This was not what they were interested in. They complained about Jesus' teaching: “This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?” They didn't mean it was hard to understand. They meant it was unpleasant, objectionable, offensive, and impossible to accept and believe. When Jesus said, “That

is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father,” that was the last straw. Since their needs weren't being met and their desires weren't being satisfied in the way they thought they should be, our text says many of these so-called disciples turned their backs on Jesus and no longer followed Him.

What about us today? We claim to be disciples of Jesus Christ. We follow Him as long as our needs are being met and our desires are being satisfied. We expect Jesus to be there when we need Him. We want Him to make no demands on our lives and have no other requirements of us than that we be nice. We think that His main job is to make us feel better by giving us the things we want and need.

But when we encounter Jesus' teaching, things may change like it did for the “disciples” in our text. It may be the teaching that we are all sinners that offends us. It may be the condemnation of a certain sin which we don't like because we do that sin – neglecting worship, selfish stewardship of our material goods, refusing to study His Word, gossiping, hating, improper sexual behavior, and so on. It may be His solution to the problem that bothers us – that the sacrifice of His body and blood on the cross – and nothing else – will save us, rather than any contribution on our part through our moral or spiritual behavior. It may be His way of delivering forgiveness and salvation to us that we have trouble with – the eating of His flesh and the drinking of His blood or maybe it's the fact that no one can come to Jesus unless the Father draws him that we can't get past.

Many will turn their back on Jesus and no longer follow Him. They will seek to be spiritually satisfied by a feel-good religion which doesn't speak of sin and judgment, but, instead, tells them how good they are and how they can have their best life now. Some will not leave the Church here but will seek fulfillment in wealth and possessions. Some will look for satisfaction in pleasure – hobbies, sports, sex, technology, and so on.

The problem with narcissism – self-love – is that it ultimately fails. What happened to Adam and Eve? They brought death into the world. They were banished from the garden and separated

from God. What happened to the people in our text? They were separated from Jesus and missed out on the kingdom of heaven which He came to bring.

What about you and me? Jesus turns to us and asks us the same question He asked the Twelve, “Do you want to go away as well?” How do you answer? Will you seek out an easy religious experience that is all emotion with very little substance? Will you, by your priorities and your actions, seek to follow materialistic solutions or earthly pleasures as the top priority in your life?

Simon Peter’s answer is short and simple: “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.” In other words, where else can we go to get what Jesus offers? Jesus’ way is tough. It begins with God’s Law which shows us our sin – not just our big and obvious sins, but our secret sins which we don’t want anyone to know and our many sins which even we don’t know – which God hates, condemns, and punishes. This is something that isn’t pleasant for us to confess.

Jesus’ way to solve our problem is not very popular – not by helping us in our earthly need or giving us what we want – the food that perishes – but by giving to us the food that endures to eternal life. This food is nothing other than Himself – the Bread of Life – His own flesh and blood which He offered on the cross as the sacrifice to pay for our sins. This is something that is hard to understand and accept.

Jesus’ way to give us the benefit of His flesh offered and His blood shed doesn’t make sense: by having us eat His flesh and drink His blood. Through that we have forgiveness and everlasting life. We receive it, not by our choosing to receive it, but by the Father drawing us to Jesus and choosing to give it to us. This is something against our rugged individualism that says we can make it on our own.

Jesus’ way leads us to eternal life, but it is not through a pain-free, suffering-free existence now. It is often a very difficult, painful, sorrowful way. Jesus’ way is the way of the cross. He went through suffering, to the cross, and then to death to earn forgiveness of sin. He passed from death to life to guarantee life after death for us all. He calls us to follow Him in the same way – the way of the cross. Following Jesus does not mean going the happy way, the easy way, or the enjoyable way

without any difficulty or inconvenience. Following Jesus means going through suffering for being faithful, to death, and from death to life everlasting. Those who seek glory now will find only death at the end. Those who accept suffering now in following Jesus will find glory for all eternity. It is a wonderful result that many desire, but not a pleasurable route that many are willing to travel

Yet the question remains: if you go away, where will you go? Can a happy experiential religion help you deal with guilt and shame? Can it give you strength when you face cancer, financial ruin, or an unexpected death? Can the fun and pleasure of this life last forever? Can the money and possessions of this age buy everlasting life? Only the words of Jesus can give eternal life because they give the forgiveness Jesus earned on the cross and the life Jesus brought forth from the tomb..

It is time to reject the narcissistic and self-centered way to which this world and the purveyors of false religions seek to lead us. Do not follow those religions which pervert the words of Jesus or do not even give you the words of Jesus. Do not follow the way of pleasure or materialism which last only for a short time. These things, as popular or fun as they may be, lead ultimately to death.

Follow the hard way which is centered on Jesus Christ. He has the words of eternal life. Hear them. Read them. Study them. Receive them. You do this, not to fulfill a religious duty, nor to please God or your pastor. You do this to receive life – a blessed life to sustain you through the trials and tribulations here on earth and a glorious life beyond your imagination in heaven which will give you joy forever.

Whenever we use Divine Service, Setting One, we sing Peter's words before the reading of the Gospel. May those words always remind you, not just to stand to hear a Bible lesson read, but that you are receiving, in the reading, hearing, and believing of Jesus' words, eternal life. Alleluia! Alleluia! Amen.