



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE THIRTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, YEAR B, AUGUST 22, 2021
1 KINGS 8:1, 6, 10-11, 22-30, 41-43; PSALM 84; EPHESIANS 6:10-20; JOHN 6:56-69

TO WHOM SHALL WE GO?

John 6:56-69 [*Jesus said, "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever." He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum. When many of his disciples heard it, they said, "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?" But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, "Does this offend you? Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. But among you there are some who do not believe." For Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe, and who was the one that would betray him. And he said, "For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father." Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. So Jesus asked the twelve, "Do you also wish to go away?" Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."*]

You may have heard me tell how I went back to school for a master's degree in music when I was in my 30s, and my son Pat was in second grade and my daughter Kelsey was just starting kindergarten, and like many adults, I had to work while I was going to school, and it was absolutely insane, and absolutely wonderful. Oh, so much work, and oh, so

much fun! I LOVED it. And I managed to get through the whole program despite my crazy life, except I took an incomplete for my final master's recital, because I just wasn't ready. And like every student who takes an incomplete, I planned to knock it out right away, but as a working mother, I just couldn't make the time, and then my mother got sick,

and it was two years later and I still hadn't done the recital to accomplish this degree. It was my albatross.

And then, at my mother's funeral, my older cousin Sheila Fiumarello, who was a well-respected classical singer and voice teacher, and whom I rarely saw, came over to me and asked how I was doing, and if she could do anything for me. And I jokingly said, "Well, you can get me my master's degree!" And she said, "I **absolutely** can do that!" And I laughed, because I had been joking. But SHE didn't laugh. She said, you need to come to ME.

And the short version of the story is that with the incredible force of her personality, which was legendary, she knocked down every one of my reasons why I couldn't do it, from being out of vocal shape to logistical and financial impossibilities – and she pushed me to somehow agree that I would get my upstairs neighbor Chris, a high school football player whom they all called Weasel, to babysit Pat and Kelsey on Tuesday nights and get them a pizza, and I would drive the hour and half from my job in the Bronx to her house in Poughkeepsie after work and then home again late in the evening, and she would work with me on my repertoire, and she brought in and paid herself for James, her

own favorite accompanist, for me, and for months we worked together.

And I registered to do my big recital. And before that semester ended, I scheduled it, and I did it. And I passed and got my Masters degree. *Sheila* got me my Masters degree.

She had said, "You need to come to ME." She knew it would be the right thing. And I learned more than music from that beautiful soul.

You go to the one who loves enough to share what they are with you.

Sheila was a force of nature and talent and generosity, and also a little terrifying. She was, honestly, one-in-a-million.

But my story isn't one-in-a-million. Just sift through your own heart for a minute. Is there not somewhere in there your own story or person that was the one that catapulted you **out** of something or **into** something that changed something – maybe everything? Who have you gone to, and who has waited... for you to stay?

You go to the one who has what you need and loves enough to share all that they are with you. **And you stay with it – because they stay with you.**

It's not always easy; it's not always pretty. Sometimes it's so hard you don't even want

to do it. I was lucky that, God-love-her, Sheila would not take no for an answer, although the benefit was *all* to me. Once the commitment was made, there was no out, there was no, “Oh, I can’t drive up there tonight; I’m exhausted.” Oh no.

Lord, to whom can we go?

Throughout the Gospels, we see poor Peter put his foot in it time and again, don’t we? But today, oh, today, Peter lays it out with clarity and prescience when he says, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.”

You go with the one who has what you need – and loves you enough to share what they are with you. Even when it’s hard.

We are Christians. WE go to Jesus, by definition! Now Peter and the disciples could literally, physically go with, and stay with, the human person, the incarnate Jesus. I think we modern-day Christians imagine that the people who could BE with Jesus **in person** had it easier; more direct communication! How much more readily would we be able to say “YES” to Jesus if he was standing right here in front of us in the flesh, solid. Right?

But think about today’s Gospel reading from John, where Jesus straight up tells them something hard: *Jesus said, “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and*

I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me.”

Jesus says this in a culture of strict, strict purity laws about food and blood. So it’s shocking language – even if it were understood as metaphor, which who knows how people in his day heard it. It’s hard to understand and stick with someone talking like that.

I don’t know that Peter understood exactly what Jesus was getting at, but Peter knew this: he had to stay with Jesus.

Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life!

Can you and I say that? I think we’re here because we believe that, or TRY to believe that – but staying with Jesus is hard! It’s hard when we read difficult scriptures. It’s even harder when life gets difficult, and we don’t understand what God is up to. Is God even there? Does God care what’s happening? It’s hard when we’re in a cold spell in our prayer life, in our faith. Is God even there? Is God listening?

We, too, can feel like turning away. John wrote “many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him.” It’s human to feel that way. To get confused, frustrated, discouraged. To feel like we’re losing faith,

even though faith and doubt go hand in hand, companions on the journey. But our HOPE is in Jesus. Even when we don't KNOW.

Jesus asked the twelve, "Do you also wish to go away?" Well, they probably felt squirrely at least, just as we do sometimes.

But Peter speaks up, "*You* have the Words of eternal life." He is so close to right. Jesus **IS** the Word of eternal life. Jesus **IS** the Word made flesh. But Peter understands enough of his experience of being with Jesus to ask what we may all ask: "Lord, no matter what, who're we gonna go to, if we don't go with you?"

Who else in our lives is the one who loves enough to share wholly what they are with us in the way Jesus does – who says COME TO ME. Eat my body, drink my blood, consume all that I am and take me wholly into your heart. Not just the way Jesus DID, with his life and teaching and his death and resurrection. But the way Jesus DOES, continues to, always, NOW. Isn't that why we are here? Where else shall we go?

There are questions to which the only answer is Jesus. And that *answer* is NOT usually a human-sized *explanation*. Because so much of life's biggest questions are inexplicable. The fullness of GOD is inexplicable, or it wouldn't be God.

Because the ultimate question that rises in me is how am I to get through this life, with its hardships and unbearable losses, if I don't go to Jesus – consuming everything that he is, all that is offered by the one who loves enough to share himself entirely with me, with US. It is hard to have faith, living in this world, but in having faith in the Word made flesh, Peter and the others got to walk the path alongside Jesus!! In all their imperfections, catalogued for millennia of people to see in the stories in Scripture, these people got to walk with Jesus.

In all our imperfections – blessedly **not** catalogued as Scripture for posterity – we, too, get to walk with Jesus!

You all, and I, have been on this path, this walking with Jesus together here at Saint Mark's for 5½ years. We've seen a thing or two together, beautiful things, and hard things. You will remain in my heart as I change and move to serve in a new ministry, but our common walk stays the same.

You've gotta know to whom to go – even, and especially, if it's hard – and where else should that be, but to the one who loves us enough to share *Godself* with us. Jesus IS the Word of eternal life. Go with HIM.