

By modern standards, the teaching ministry of Jesus was a disaster. I mean, look at what happens in the Gospel lesson. Much of his audience was offended by what he said; when questioned, he did not backpedal, but continued to force the issue; and worst of all, John reports that “After this, many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him.” It doesn’t sound like this Jesus is going to make your church explode with growth. His listeners voted with their feet; they were disturbed by this Bread of Life stuff, by the thought of eating and drinking Jesus; it was just too much, too weird, too unsettling, so they left. Jesus’ sermon had bombed.

Now, just so we’re clear, when I say that Jesus’ sermon bombed, and that his teaching could be construed as a disaster, I’m being a bit cute with my language. But, I am trying to magnify the point that applying worldly standards of success to the life of the Spirit may not present a full or fair picture of what’s really going on. No Christian would seriously suggest that Jesus’ ministry was a failure; and yet, in our age, when a preacher’s significance is judged largely by the size of his church, and a congregation’s vitality is gauged by how many members it has, it is easy to lose sight of the fact that the very Son of God Himself did not have a 100% success rate in reaching people with his message. When you really stop to think about that, it’s a little astonishing. There were people who had the benefit of hearing Jesus speak in person who were not persuaded that he was telling the truth. Why is that?

That’s a question with an answer that could be very complex. But it is also just this simple: sin got in the way. We confess it nearly every time we gather for worship, but do we believe it—that we are by nature sinful and unclean? If that is true, and Holy Scripture says it is, then that means we are naturally, sinfully opposed to God’s truth. We feel no need for it; we don’t pursue it; make decisions based on what is right for me, and what makes sense to me, and what I stand to gain in a given situation. Jesus’ teaching calls people to stop being self-centered, and to think of life in a whole new way. A way that doesn’t necessarily make much sense. Human minds, shot through with sin, echo those who heard Jesus’ voice and still said, “This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?” Who can accept it? Who can say “yes” to someone who calls himself “the Bread of Life” and who wants people to feed on his flesh and drink his blood? The sinner says, “Not me.”

The enemy is not Jesus and his teaching; the enemy is us. The fault lies not with Jesus’ preaching skill or vivid illustrations or his truth-telling; the fault is with humanity, because in sin, we can’t handle the truth. We know if we stop walking with Him, we won’t have to hear it, and if we’re not hearing Him, then maybe we can convince ourselves that we never really needed him anyway. It is the scariest freedom we possess—the freedom to pull away from Jesus, to recast Him in an image that is more to our liking, or to ignore the words He has spoken. Then we end up saying things like, “Well, my God would never do...this or that thing,” as if God only does things that I think are right. Do you see how turned around we can get? Can we begin to understand how someone could listen to Jesus and then walk away? Whenever the true Jesus comes around, He is a threat to the sinner, because there can only be one King. He is a threat to the status quo, because the status quo is about hanging onto things, and Jesus is about changing things—human hearts and minds, in particular. The real Jesus comes around today through His Word, recorded in Holy Scripture, and the Sacraments, such as the Lord’s Supper, where his flesh is given us to eat and his blood is given

us to drink. His coming to us is the only hope we've got. So, give full thought to Jesus' question today: "Do you want to go away as well?"

When Jesus asked that same question of his closest students, this is how Simon Peter answered: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God." And Jesus tells one more bit of truth here: He says, "Did I not choose you, the Twelve? And yet one of you is a devil." The devil he was talking about was Judas Iscariot.

Peter answered well. His words live on in a familiar part of our liturgy: "Alleluia, Lord to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life!" What a strong statement of faith that is, framed by the rhetorical question, "Where else would we go, Lord Jesus?" But take note: Jesus is quick to respond by saying, "Didn't I choose you?" It was not the other way around. Jesus came around and claimed these men and gave them a completely new sense of what living is about. Jesus found and chose Peter, and only then could Peter make his good confession. If you and I can join Peter in that confession of Jesus as the Holy One of God, it is because Jesus has chosen you to be His own. Jesus has laid claim to you through the adoption of Holy Baptism. The Holy Spirit creates faith in our hearts; faith that depends on Jesus' death and resurrection for our standing with God. That gift of faith also receives Jesus' words as words of eternal life. Jesus' words aren't just talking *about* something—they *deliver* something real to you and me. Jesus' words are the vehicles that bring you forgiveness of sins, healing, reconciliation, and the certainty of continued existence in His loving presence forever. The gift of faith regards Jesus' words as describing a reality that the sin-sickened mind cannot grasp: a reality where the weak are made strong, the poor and low are lifted up to places of honor; where the slave is the real nobleman, and where death itself has passed away. Where Jesus, God's Word-in-the-flesh is, there his kingdom is as well. It is a kingdom characterized by the old order of things being turned on its head, by undeserved kindness and renewal of our hearts and minds that flows from Jesus to us.

In fact, we take Jesus into ourselves in His kingdom. The bread that Jesus gave for the world, his own flesh, he serves to us to eat, that we may know forgiveness. We feed on the body and blood of Jesus, given and shed for you and me, confident in His promise that whoever does so is given eternal life and will be raised up by the Lord on the last day. We take Jesus at His Word on this, and because we do, we approach this feast with reverence and careful preparation, conscious of Jesus' own words: "Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me and I in him." In Holy Communion, the real Jesus unites with us, giving us the benefits of his sacrificial death, and binding us to His never-ending Life.

There will always be those who say, "How can this man give us His flesh to eat?" Blessed with the gift of faith, we can say: "His Words give exactly what they say. They are the words of eternal life." Give to us, Lord Jesus. Our lives depend on it.