

"Not For the Faint of Heart"
John 6:56-69
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*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." John 6:67-68*

Elaine Pagels currently has a much talked-about book on the *New York Times* bestseller list about the recently discovered Gospel of Judas, a Coptic manuscript from the third or fourth century. Several years ago, she wrote a book entitled *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas*, a text that was discovered in Egypt in 1974. Many documents written in the first three or four hundred years after the birth of Christ were not included in the New Testament, and *Beyond Belief* offers a provocative analysis of why some letters and manuscripts never made it into the Bible, and others did. It also provides a fascinating window into the early history of the Christian movement and into the lives and thoughts of Christianity's earliest followers. For example, Pagels tells the story of Justin Martyr, an erudite Roman citizen, very well-respected as a philosopher. He converted to Christianity sometime around the year 140 A.D. He wrote of the radical change that had come about in his own life and in the life of his faith community, because of the gospel of Christ. He wrote, "We who once valued over everything else acquiring wealth and possessions now find ourselves bringing all that we have and putting it into a common fund, so it can be used by those in need. We who once hated and refused to live with people of another tribe . . . have now come to live intimately with them." (1)

Christianity was a radically counter-cultural movement in its first several hundred years. As lives and communities were transformed by Christianity, that transformation came with a cost. Friends of the early Christians were offended and thought

their friends who had been baptized had lost their minds. Family members were scandalized, and of course, the civilian officials were outraged. Pagels tells another story of a young woman, an aristocrat named Vibia, who lived in Carthage in North Africa. She was married and the mother of a young son. She made the decision to be baptized, and when the magistrate of Carthage asked her if, indeed, she were a Christian, she said that she was, and he had her thrown in to prison. Her father came to see her and tried to talk her out of her foolishness. She said to him, "Do you see that water jar in the corner?"

Her father said, "Yes, I do."

"Can it be called any other name than a water jar?"

He answered, "No, a water jar is a water jar."

And she answered, "Well, so too, I cannot be called anything other than what I am. I am a follower of Christ. That is who I am." And though she was pressed by her father and others to deny her identity, she would not, and so the day came when she was led from her cell and taken to the amphitheater in Carthage, where she and others of similar resolve were torn apart by beasts.(2)

To be a follower of Jesus Christ in the early years was not for the faint of heart. It is obvious from reading the New Testament texts themselves. All one has to do is to turn, for example, to the Letter to the Ephesians. (Ephesus was the Roman capital in Asia Minor.) Paul, the apostle, likely the author of Ephesians, was himself in shackles in prison. He writes to his friends in Ephesus with muscular imagery, encouraging them to be strong in answer to the powers and principalities that threatened them. "Take your strength from the Lord. Put on the breastplate of righteousness. Take up the shield of faith, so that you will be able to quench the flaming arrows that come your way."

I offer this historical overview this morning, because I have been reflecting upon what you and I mean when we identify ourselves as members of a Christian church, as disciples of Jesus Christ,

as people who are drawn to the powerful, beautiful story of a man who lived and died and rose again and opened up a new future for the world.

What do we mean when we say we are members of the Christian faith? Are we speaking of a commitment for which we would put our lives on the line? The other evening, I went a second time to see the papers of Martin Luther King Jr. at the Atlanta History Center. King could be legitimately be called a modern American martyr for the cause of Christ, but I am having a hard time thinking of others who would fit that category in our culture. Of course, we are not citizens of an oppressive empire; we are not subject to persecution or death because of our faith. But the question is a real one. How deep is our Christian identity? Is it one of many aspects of who we are? Does our baptism cause us to act differently from other people or to treat other people differently? Does it make us braver? If someone looked at you or looked at me would what that person see reflected somehow, somehow, the self-emptying love of God revealed in Jesus Christ?

Clarence Jordan was the founder of the Koinonia community in Americus, GA. It is from there that first Jubilee Partners and then Habitat for Humanity were born. Jordan was probably right when he said that Jesus has many admirers but few followers.

This morning's lesson from John's Gospel has something important to teach us in this regard, I believe. John's Gospel made it into the Bible and is what we consider in the church to be our authoritative witness to Christ and to what it means to follow him. John's Gospel takes us to a dramatic moment in Jesus' ministry when it was glaringly apparent who his fair-weather friends were and who his true disciples were going to be. He had been teaching in the synagogue in Capernaum, saying strange, even harsh sounding things that were hard for his hearers to get their minds around, such as, "Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. . .those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me and me in them."

What did he mean? That those who follow him will, in some way, have to participate in his death, will live sacrificially, will bear witness to his sacrifice, and in doing so, come close to him and he to them, and all will abide in God, who is one with the Son. The flesh and blood part was offensive to people. Jesus' enemies among the religious leaders couldn't stand hearing it. But not only they - the disciples present also complained. They couldn't understand why he had to make it so hard. Why couldn't he encourage them with a little positive thinking? Give them a tip or two about how they might receive their reward in heaven? No, he had to talk about participating in his death. This is not the way you fill up the Georgia Dome, is it?

The crowds in the synagogue thinned out quickly. Even many of those who had been following him all along decided to call it a day. Yes, they wanted to walk with him on the sunny side of the street, but when he put the cost of discipleship on the table, it was time to move on. John put it plainly, "Many of his disciples turned back and no longer went with him."

Jesus' message, his way, were not for the faint of heart. Actually, there are two offenses in this teaching of Jesus from the Gospel of John. The first is that it's hard and often costly. The second is the idea that, as Jesus said, "No one can come to me unless it has been granted by the father." This was offensive to Jesus' followers. They had a hard time with the idea that Jesus had known from the first the ones who would believe and the ones who would not believe. It was an affront to hear that their being there in the first place was God's doing and not their own.

I find that idea difficult myself. I like choice. I like the idea of self-determination. I have trouble with the idea that God knows all things, has a plan for all things, has a plan for my life which I am living out rather than choosing. One of the questions I am asked most often as a pastor is, "Do you think there a plan for my life? Is my job to create my life plan or to discover it?"

I sometimes bear my Presbyterian predestination identity awkwardly, as one might wear scratchy woolen underwear in a

cold climate. I am not thrilled about it, but that's what you do, if you say you believe in the sovereignty of God. It's hard though. I remember how much you enjoyed a story I told a couple of years ago about the two pastors who decided to exchange pulpits one day. This was two centuries ago in Boston. A Calvinist Presbyterian and a Wesleyan Methodist for years had debated from the pulpit and in their private conversations, this matter of divine determinism. Neither would give an inch. One believed in free will. The other believed in predestination. One Sunday, in the spirit of brotherhood, they decided to have a pulpit exchange. When Sunday came, each minister got on his horse and rode toward the other minister's church. The paths of their horses happened to cross along the road. They greeted one another, and the Presbyterian couldn't resist saying, "My dear brother, I feel as if I must remind you that before the foundation of the universe God did decree that on this Sabbath day, you would be preaching from my pulpit and I would be preaching from yours."

To which the Methodist brother replied, "If that is the case, then sir, I shall not do it." He turned his horse around and went back and preached from his own pulpit. (3)

That day in Capernaum the free-choicers did turn back; they no longer went about with Jesus. He asked the little band of twelve who were still with him, "Do you wish to go away?"

Peter answered for the rest when he said, "Lord to whom can we go?" *What are we going to do? We are here because God has called us, and we have discovered that you are the only one with the words for eternal life.* They were free to choose, but their capacity to choose, the wisdom to choose, had been granted by God. Think of the two martyrs of whom I spoke earlier. They made a decision for Christ, but long before they had ever heard Christ's name, God had made a decision for *them*, in Christ. "For God so loved the world, that God gave God's own son, that whosoever believeth in him shall not perish but have eternal life." Eternal life, begins, by the way, not after we die, but that which is available to us now, the gracious presence of God in the here and now.

Someone asked me once why I did not issue an altar call at the end of my sermons. I answered that there is no altar in the Presbyterian Church, but rather a communion table reflecting our Presbyterian emphasis on the sufficiency of God's choice and Christ's sacrifice. The other reason is our emphasis on the fact that God alone makes it possible for you and for me at some point to stand and confess, along with Simon Peter, that we have come to believe that Christ is the Holy One of God. We take no credit for it. We receive the gift of faith with gratitude.

It's hard, though, to follow Christ. He doesn't want just a part of us. He wants all of us, as he gave all of himself for us.

I am just back last night from Louisville at a meeting of a national church board. I visited there with a friend from Kansas. In the course of our conversation, she told me that she and her family had recently joined a new church. I asked what was the matter with the old one?

She said, "There was an easy answer to every question. Nothing was ever asked of us. There was nothing to it."

To follow Christ is to go deep and to offer ourselves sacrificially as a community and as individual human beings. I think about this foolish discipleship business that got a dozen of you up yesterday and took you away from your comfortable dens and kitchen tables and had you out building a house for a family in the community. Another dozen of you were down at the Atlanta Community Food Bank sorting food.

I think of how it is that none of us is subject to persecution for our faith. We are not under death threats because of what we believe, but that does not mean that God is not calling each of us to live a committed life. To follow him is to acknowledge that something is expected.

Clarence Jordan had a brother who became a state senator and a Georgia Supreme Court Justice. Koinonia was always in trouble with the authorities and with the neighbors because it

was an interracial community and a prophetic community. Once they were in some legal trouble. Clarence Jordan asked his brother if he would represent the farm in some legal action. "Clarence, I can't do that," his brother answered. "You know my political aspirations. If I represented you, I'd lose my house, my job."

Clarence said, "We might lose too."

"It's different for you"

"Why is it different? I remember, it seems, that you and I joined the church on the same Sunday as boys. I expect when we came forward, the preacher asked me about the same question he did you. He asked me, 'Do you accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior?' I said yes. What did you say?"

"I follow Jesus, Clarence, up to a point."

"Could that point be by chance the cross?"

"That's right. I follow him to the cross, but I'm not going to get on the cross. I'm not getting myself crucified."

"Then I don't believe you are a disciple of Jesus. You're an admirer. . .but not a disciple of his. I think you ought to go back to the church you belong to and tell them you're an admirer but not a disciple." (4)

I close with a simple story at the end of this complex teaching about sacrifice. At our baptisms, we enter into the story of Christ and the way he lived and died. My good friend Buddy Enniss tells a story of a minister who gave a children's sermon one Sunday. He invited the kids down front. (I did that once, you remember? It was a terrifying experience, but I will do it again. Bravery for Christ comes in all forms.)

The minister sat on the chancel steps along with the children of the congregation and asked, "Do any of you remember the

names of Jesus' disciples-that is, those who belong to him and follow his way?"

One kid said, "Matthew."

The minister said, "That's right."

Another said, "Mark."

"Good."

Another said, "Luke."

"Very good."

Encouraged by the success of his friends, another little guy said, "Charlie."

Everybody laughed of course, but when things settled down, the minister asked the little guy, "What's your name?"

"My name is Charlie." (5)

Sisters and brothers in Christ, we were baptized into this discipleship business- Matthew, Mark, Luke, Charlie, all of us at Morningside. I pray that we will have the faith and courage to go with him all the way.

(1) Elaine Pagels, *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas*, Random House, 2003, p.13.

(2) Ibid, pp.11-12.

(3) As told by P.C. Enniss in "Predestination," Central Presbyterian Church, August 24, 1980.

(4) As told by K. C. Ptomey, quoting from James W. McClendon, jr., *Biography as Theology: How Life Stories Can Remake Today's Theology*, Abingdon Press, 1974, pp. 127-128.

(5) "Get Real," Trinity Presbyterian Church, 8/25/02.