

August 8, 2021  
Eleventh Sunday After Pentecost

“In Christ is In Contrast”

John 6:35-51

We're in the middle of a three-week divergence from Mark's Gospel in the lectionary where we're going through what is called the Bread of Life Discourse in John, chapter 6. It is loaded with wonderful Gospel promises from the mouth of Christ, yet it is also kind of a tragedy because in the summary of next week's reading we are told, *“After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him.”*

This is actually kind of a double tragedy. Jesus is addressing the crowd, and the crowd is made up of those suspicious of Jesus, lukewarm about Jesus, enthusiastic about Jesus, and everything in between but not quite believing in Jesus. But they've come and are looking upon Jesus and hearing His words so are targets of the blessing of the Father Jesus speaks of: *“For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.”* The first tragedy is what Jesus says of them: *“You have seen me and yet do not believe.”* This is true. Note at verse 41 this group that was referred to as “the crowd” now is referred to as “the Jews,” indicating they are now opposed to Christ.

The lost have been found, but they will not follow the Good Shepherd who found them. The Word of God, spoken by God Himself no less, has been in their ears and stands rejected. This happens. That parable of Jesus says so with the seed that falls on the path and is eaten before it ever sprouts—the Word has no effect. And we know folks like this, some even brought up in the church, whose hearts never really received the Gospel and rejected the gifts of their Holy Baptism. We pray for them, witness to them in the hope their heart of stone will be broken and replaced with a heart of flesh seeking, receiving and believing in Jesus.

But then there is the second tragedy, one we may perceive as being even worse than the first because, well, it's like it is a tragedy for someone to never have known love, but it seems even worse if someone knows the sweetness of love and then loses it. That's kind of what happens at the end of the reading next week. Jesus says, *“No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day.”*

Faith unto salvation isn't something you can do; it's a blessed gift the Father gives. It's the Holy Spirit working through the Word to call you into belief and thus receive the kingdom. Holy Scripture is quite clear on this and it's kind of disturbing—some are elected unto salvation and some aren't and Almighty God doesn't clue us in to any rhyme or reason of His that's behind it all. The Father *“desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth”* yet all don't. Some are saved and others lost.

You can't understand it but thank God you have landed on the right side of things. You are baptized. You are seeing and believing through the eyes of faith. Word and Sacrament has done it's blessed work upon your body and soul and you stand in the promise: *“Everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.”* Hallelujah! Praise the Lord!

But there is the second, and possibly more tragic tragedy-- *“After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him.”* These were not the crowd. These were disciples, followers, believers—these were those who had received the gift of the Holy Spirit—

faith in Christ—and then turned their back on it because His Words and teaching were difficult and offensive to them.

I brought up next weeks Gospel simply because of what St. Paul says in today's epistle: *"This I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart."* He says this as a warning to Christians.

Being a Christian is difficult not because the message of the Gospel is difficult but because the thinking of the world and the leading of our own sinful nature are opposed to the Gospel; opposed to walking in the way of Christ. And Paul is drawing a stark contrast between those who walk in the way of the world and us—those who received and believe Christ Jesus! The tragedy of those disciples is that Christ didn't harmonize with the world, so they rejected Jesus and chose the world—and that's really the only way it works—one way or the other way.

This is what St. Paul is making clear. He admonishes those who are in Christ *"to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness."*

But look around the church today, both in the greater scope of denomination where you see many going totally off the rails in pursuit of the world, and also and especially so in the realm of our own thinking as Christian individuals. Are we living and thinking that stark separation of "old self" and "new self", that division of those who follow Jesus and those who don't? Or is our life a wishy-washy mish-mash trying to harmonize the leading and desires of the flesh with the holiness in Christ to which we've been called? Among Christians, myself included, I see folks willfully attempting a balancing act between the fallen and the holy.

People do this with sins, of course. Refusing to repent—rationalizing, excusing and getting comfortable with sin. God's Word and the preaching of it drags that out into the open quite frequently and proclaims, "Repent and believe in the Gospel."

But if you read over Paul's writing in Ephesians, he goes beyond blatant sin and goes more into our attitudes as Christians; our speech, bitterness, anger and such. He calls us to tenderheartedness, grace, and walking in love. And I've got to say, it seems like a lot of us are rejecting this call and thinking we're just fine in doing so.

The world is getting really stupid. Let's face it, it is. Our society is not only rejecting Biblical and moral norms, it's increasingly tossing natural law and science to the curb. The rule of law seems to be eroding. Our political divide is greater and more vicious than I've ever seen. And I look on social media and have conversations and what are Christians doing? Getting angry. Getting nasty. Getting vicious in their words and attitudes. And we think it's okay because we're right!

It's not okay. Read what Paul says. There's no exceptions and we know there are no exceptions. *"Walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God."*

Folks, whether it is regarding sin, politics, economics, race, sports, traffic, academics, career, family, friends or church, we are called to walk as Christ does. It is supremely difficult to do so because there is an evil, broken world around us and it's trying to suck us in to its futile thinking. Christ's call is opposed to such thinking and His words are tough to accept. If you're harboring anger and bitterness in your mind and you think it's okay because you're in the right about things, your head is going down the wrong road. You're focused on the world and its

wrongness and guess what, the fallen world isn't going to change and you really want to get your head in a better place.

That better place is where Jesus has placed you—in His flesh. You are not of the world. You stand baptized into Christ ascended and reigning above and over this mess we call the world. In loving grace He chose you of all people to be His apart and beyond this. Sure, the brokenness, evil and stupidity of the world is appalling—but that's not you! You are apart from it in Jesus. You are blessed! You are eternal! You are His and have been chosen by God to receive a superpower that most people don't have—the ability to walk before God in blessedness and holiness forever! Can you really believe and receive this gift and then choose anger and bitterness instead of gratitude reflecting His love? You can't.

If you choose the road of bitterness, you're being like the Jews rejecting Christ because He is not what you want. You're being like those believers who no longer followed Christ because His teaching was too difficult to stomach. You're choosing the wrong road.

Don't do that. Live in the choice of God—the choice He made to elect you to eternal life in Christ. Why did He do it? I don't know. You don't deserve it. He shouldn't have done it. But He did! You're baptized! Alleluia. Don't let the world take away the joy this brings! Put on your new self, the Jesus self that He has given you in His flesh crucified and risen, and walk in that love, that attitude as an imitator of gracious God, knowing you're on the same path as He, through the pain, suffering, injustice, evil and stupidity of the world, and on to the kingdom in eternity where this broken life isn't even a memory.

Amen.