

Christ's Bad Day at the Office

^{NRS} **John 6:56** Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.⁵⁷ Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me.⁵⁸ 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."⁵⁹ He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum.⁶⁰ When many of his disciples heard it, they said, "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?"⁶¹ But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, "Does this offend you?"⁶² Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before?⁶³ It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.⁶⁴ 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.⁶⁵ And he said, "For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father."⁶⁶ Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him.⁶⁷ So Jesus asked the twelve, "Do you also wish to go away?"⁶⁸ Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.⁶⁹ We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."

^{NRS} **John 7:1** After this Jesus went about in Galilee. He did not wish to go about in Judea because the Jews were looking for an opportunity to kill him.² Now the Jewish festival of Booths was near.³ So his brothers said to him, "Leave here and go to Judea so that your disciples also may see the works you are doing;⁴ for no one who wants to be widely known acts in secret. If you do these things, show yourself to the world."⁵ (For not even his brothers believed in him.)⁶ Jesus said to them, "My time has not yet come, but your time is always here.⁷ The world cannot hate you, but it hates me because I testify against it that its works are evil.⁸ Go to the festival yourselves. I am not going to this festival, for my time has not yet fully come."⁹ After saying this, he remained in Galilee. But after his brothers had gone to the festival, then he also went, not publicly but as it were in secret.

What do you do when you give your best, and your best isn't quite good enough?

Things had been going so well. Ever since Jesus rocketed into ministry with his Ernest and Julio Gallo imitation at the wedding at Cana, things were going non stop for him. Right after wedding, one of the grand poobas from the Pharisees, Nicodemus, shows at his door in the middle of the night with some good questions- a sure sign his name was getting around the right people. And then Jesus met that woman at the well in

Samaria, changing her life forever. And on the heels of that Jesus met that man blind from birth- told him to take up his mat and walk. And he did! And so word was getting around. People wanted to see this guy. Business was booming, which meant crowds started turning out to see him in droves.

And this was great- this was fantastic, but all this success also came with problems. When you've got all these people out there to see you in the middle of the desert, what the heck do you do with them? It reminds me of that great IBM commercial a while back. It was this fledging company just starting out and they had just got their website up. And you can tell they are waiting to see if any orders are going to come in. And you can see the concern on their faces- is anyone going order anything? Are we going to sink or swim? And then the camera pans in on the computer screen, and you hear a beep as it registers one order. And then slowly another. And another. And then you see the relaxed smiles on the faces of the partners- whew, it was going to be ok. But then the camera pans back to the screen again- and you hear the beeping start to go crazy, and the numbers of orders started going through the roof into the millions. And then you see the deer in the headlights look on the faces of the partners again and you realize they weren't really set up for that much success. Sometimes you can have too much of a good thing.

And this is exactly where the disciples and Jesus found themselves. They're out there in the desert with all these people- which is awesome! But, they're out there in the *desert* with all these people. What on earth are they supposed to do? And you know the story- Jesus tells the disciples to feed the crowds. All they came up with is that little snout nosed kid with a couple of moldy loaves and pathetic sardines- what good was that

going to be? And then, in Jesus' greatest miracle to that point- he takes this pittance, I mean it's barely enough to feed a child, he takes it and somehow all walk away that night fed. It was unbelievable.

It's even more amazing than it sounds in scripture, too. See, we know it as the feeding of the five thousand, but really this is a misnomer. The ancients weren't lazy about much, but when it came to counting crowds- they didn't always do the best job of getting the whole picture. See, when the ancients counted crowds- they were what you might call estrogen challenged. They only counted the men- no women, no children. And so when the Gospel writers record Jesus feeding five thousand people- most commentators say it was probably somewhere around 10,000 or 15,000 people.

So imagine it- 10 or 15 thousand people. Ever been to a Portland Beavers' game- they only average 5,000 which feels like a pretty good crowd to me.¹ So, clearly it's the big time for Jesus, right? He has this huge group of disciples and he has them all right in the palm of his hands.

And that brings us to today. That brings us to our story today. We start off the chapter with the feeding and with this massive crowd, but then what happens? Anyone? What happens to this huge crowd of disciples in the text today? Yeah, in an amazing example of reverse evangelism Jesus takes this enormous crowd- and with a sermon guaranteed not to make friends and influence people, he manages to offend all of them so badly that they high tail it out of there. The entire crowd. He even goes to the 12 that are left and asks them if they want to leave, too. And if you read very carefully, you'll notice they don't exactly tell him "Oh no, we're behind you all the way." Peter just says, "Well, where would we go?" Yeah, he affirms that they believe he's sent from God, but you

¹ http://www.minorleaguebaseball.com/external/brandedstats/t248.html?t=1_att&cid=248&lid=112

know if you were asking someone you loved whether they wanted to stay with you or not- “well, where would I go” wouldn’t exactly be the most reassuring answer.

So wow- from 15,000 followers to 12 in just one worship service. I mean this has to be a record.

It also has to be one of the most disappointing days in Jesus’ entire life.

You know, when I think about Jesus and disappointment other stories leap to mind more quickly. Stories like Peter denying him three times. And obviously the crucifixion- probably an understatement to that a disappointment, right? But what’s different about those stories is that there it’s *other* people disappoint Jesus- Peter is the one who is a coward. The Romans and the good people leading the church of the day are the ones who put him to death. But this story- this story is different. This story is different because here there’s really no one to blame. What you have is this massive crowd, Jesus’ teaching, and the crowd telling him “Thanks for playing.”

I don’t know if I’ve shared this with you or not, but I remember being very thankful one day in seminary that I don’t come from the African-American call and response tradition. I mean sometimes it seems great- I mean no one’s falling asleep, everyone’s listening and shoutin’ back their two cents worth: “Preach it, preacher! Um-hm!” One day in chapel, though, we had a young guy, Toby, from this tradition stand up to preach. And I thought his sermon was very interesting. He was exploring some pretty far out theological ideas- the kind of thing you do in seminary. And his friends in congregation started out OK, “Yes, sir!” you’d hear. Or “That’s right! That’s right!” But then as Toby moved into liberation and feminist theology- the responses slowed down and eventually stopped. And then he tossed one more off the wall idea, I don’t

even remember what it was now, into the mix. And it was just too much, it was just too far out there- and so this one big guy, Carl, with this huge booming voice intoned: “I don’t see where you’re going with this preacher. Help him, Jesus. Help him, Lord.” And poor Toby visibly paled at this and seemed to finish up before he was really ready. I remember feeling the hairs on the back of my neck stand up and looking at my white bread friends thinking, “You know, maybe it’s OK our congregations aren’t always quite as verbally engaged and responsive.” Do I hear an amen on that one?

Well I think it must have been like for Jesus. There he was just preaching away, and he was so excited by the sheer energy of the crowd that he just keeps going further and further- until he starts talking about people actually eating his flesh and drinking his blood. And believe me, if this sounds a little funny to our ears today, to a kosher Jewish audience who thinks merely being in the presence of blood can make you unclean much less eating a man and drinking his blood- well, it’s just obscene. And the fact that Jesus was using poetic, symbolic language, not literal language, like he does throughout the Gospel of John- just sails right over the crowd’s head. He gets a big fat, “I don’t see where you’re going with this!” from the crowd. So much so that they desert him- all of them but the twelve.

Oh what do you do when you give it your best- and your best just isn’t good enough?

You all know me pretty well at this point. You know that I tend to throw myself into things with everything I’ve got- especially at first. Well I’ve always been this way- I

was especially this way as a student. While I really was not a great high school student, when I started studying Greek and the New Testament as an undergraduate- something just clicked on inside of me. I couldn't study enough. Everything I read just brought up more questions and lead to more resources. And the program I was in was designed perfectly for this- that small group I've talked about before, where we basically got to design our own major around our interests. And of course the culmination of all that learning was a thesis. I think last January I shared with you my odd duck thesis- I think the exact title was The Function of Thaumaturgy in Luke-Acts. And while I realize this sounds really bad, I shared that Leah's thesis was on ugly architecture- she had all these horrible pictures of mobile homes that made our dorm rooms look down right comfy. Meagan's thesis was on Guatemalan midwifery- thank God there were no pictures. And other projects were on everything from drug trafficking in Columbia to theosophy in the art of Piet Mondrian. So honestly, compared with my friends, my thesis didn't look all that strange.

Well, as I always do, I threw every single thing I had into this project. And my thesis grew and grew, and changed so many times, according to what I thought my director wanted- I can't even remember what I started with. And you should know that there was a prize for the best thesis- and wasn't one of those stupid fake gold trophy's they give you because everyone is a winner in life- no, it was a cash prize worth 5,000 bucks, which, for a liberal arts undergraduate thesis, was crazy money. Well, the whole group knew that at the end of the year, it had come down to two of us- it was either going to be me, or my friend Vasu Raja, who wrote this incomprehensible work on postmodern literary criticism and Hamlet. Well, honestly, I don't believe I did much else that last

semester but stay up late, drink peanut butter espresso shakes from Captain Quackenbush's Galactic Coffee House on Guadalupe and hammer away at The Function of Thaumaturgy in Luke-Acts. I can't remember wanting anything much more than to have the best thesis.

Well, graduation came, and the evening for our big humanities dinner came. The moment had arrived. And ol' Doctor Farmer, our mentor and advisor, got all gussied up to say a few words and to give us the results of the judging. And he told us all what a great job we did. And then he singled out Vasu and myself to tell us what fine jobs each of us did, with me thinking "Come on, old man, come on!" in my head. And then, just like that, he announced the news. He announced that the judges were rewarding...Vasu for his excellent work that year. What? There had to be a mistake, I thought. But there wasn't. And there was nothing for me to do but to smile, shake my friend's hand, and wonder what the heck just happened. Though I didn't show it much, I was crushed. And I knew very well what it was to give your all, and for that not to be quite good enough. And it wasn't a good feeling.

So how about Jesus? How does he react? It's such a marvelous thing to watch Jesus in this passage- to watch him as those disciples drift away with nothing really to blame it on but his own preaching. It's marvelous because we know that whatever disappointment we've felt, whatever dream we had that came crashing down all around us- we see first hand that even he knows something of this as well. And it's also marvelous because he's one heck of a model for how to get through these times.

The first thing that just me away in this passage is that Jesus stays focused on God rather than his own disappointment. Unlike you and I- filled with self-doubt, wondering what could we have done differently. Was there something we could have done differently- or maybe not done? Jesus knows it isn't about him at all, but that God is the one who opens hearts and closes them. He says to them all: "For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father." The church gets so obsessed with Jesus saying no one comes to the Father but through him. This text provides such a great balance to this, reminding us we can talk about Jesus until we're blue in the face, but if it isn't the right time in a person's life- we might as well save our breath. And this is what Jesus realizes- which is why he doesn't need to shout at those people leaving or condemn them. It just isn't the right time yet for them to hear him- it doesn't mean there's anything the matter with him or his message; it just isn't the right time. And really, everyone should have known this- I mean it's was only the 7th chapter in John, right? Everybody can't get it at the beginning of the book- that would ruin the story. ☺

So Jesus first keeps his perspective and realizes this set back isn't about him and his abilities but is in God's hands. Second, despite the toughness it took to stand his ground, Jesus isn't stupid either. In the wake of this devastating disappointment, he tucks his tail and leaves even the disciples to head for the safety of his brothers. Jesus knows himself well enough to know he's not good company after this, and he seeks out the people that he needed at the time. In our psychotherapeutic culture today sometimes we think we should talk about everything all the time. We think it's *always* good to just get things out in the open. Well, this is just isn't true. When we've been hurt and

disappointed, Jesus shows us that sometimes we need time before we're ready to face things again. There's nothing wrong with strategic retreats to cool off and collect yourself with the people you know are in your corner? I wonder about you- I wonder who are these people in your life? Who are the people you know you can count on when everything has gone down the tubes? And if you can't come up with these folks in your head- believe me, this is something you will want to think about.

Now the last thing we see from Jesus comes after the actual lectionary text. The lectionary text stops at the end of John 6, but I added the next big in 7, because we find out where Jesus goes and most importantly- whether he comes back or not. And what we learn is that he keeps perspective, gives himself some time to heal- and then in the end, and maybe most importantly of all, after he cools off- he gets back on the horse again and goes back to Galilee. And notice the most important detail of all here- he doesn't go back exactly as he was. No, he goes back wisely in secret- to feel things out.

Well, I'd love to tell you that my taste of disappointment as an undergraduate was balanced by triumph in seminary. There, too, my friends and I found ourselves drooling over a large prize for a thesis- this time \$10,000. And again, I set about to write a spellbinding, page turning thesis- this one with the pithy title, "Beneath an Empty Sky: Presence, Absence, and the Possibility of Being For the Other in the work of Jacques Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas". I know, I know- why hasn't Hollywood jumped on it? Your guess is as good as mine. Well, this was a great thesis, too- better than the first one I think. But, alas, this one wasn't good enough either. On graduation night I lost out to a guy named Tim who hardly ever showed up to classes. We thought I was a shoe in

because even though we had a couple of classes he was supposedly in the first time we saw the guy all semester was that night. Well it turns out he must have been working on his thesis the whole time because it was his name that rang out not mine.

Now, I'd be lying if I said I wasn't disappointed- but honestly, it wasn't nearly as bad as before. This time I already set about the project a little differently, a little more wisely. This time I focused on something I was really interested in, so even if it didn't win, I would be pleased with my work. And man, talk about having good friends to cheer me up. My next door neighbors, John and Cindy Semmes, were so excited graduation night- John hopped into his green, Ford Explorer and they drove right through the middle of our student housing, not on the roads mind you but around and in between the buildings themselves, with the radio blaring and honking his horn. And you know, it's hard stay in the dumps when your neighbors are recklessly endangering the neighborhood in the middle of the night.

Friends, Fall is just around the corner. You can almost feel it in the mornings, can't you. We've got so many ideas about what we want to do- in our lives, in our church. But we also need to remember that simply being faithful to our call does not mean that all our plans will work out just like we hope. Our life of faith is a life of great joy, no doubt- but it is also a life of great disappointment, too. I think this is true because we're only disappointed when we allow ourselves care, and when you have faith- well faith is letting yourself care about your dreams for the world and the people around you. So my friends, do what you are called to do this week. If it works out- hooray. If it doesn't. Well, I'll leave you with the words of golfer Greg Norman when he lost the

Masters after going into Sunday with a six stroke lead: “Am I disappointed? Sure, I’m disappointed. But I’m not going to go around and head-butt people like Dennis Rodman.” So let us hold fast to the good, avoid what is evil, and know that whatever befalls us- Jesus, our brother, walks beside us. **Amen.**