

Pentecost 14B (8/26/2018)

Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18

Psalm 34:15-22

Ephesians 6:10-20

John 6:56-71

Our faith, no matter how earnest, is uncertain. We dwell in the space between conviction and doubt, between devotion and desertion. And, this vacillation is inherent in the life of discipleship. Faith is not about posturing, or proving to yourself and others that you've got it all figured out. Faith means to be claimed by Jesus in the first place, to be fully known, then to struggle day after day to grasp the mystery of God's purpose in him.

“Do you also wish to go away?”

I take Jesus' question to his closest followers at face value. I don't think he's simply putting them to the test, demanding that they swear loyalty to him in the wake of the mass exodus of other so-called disciples. At the conclusion of his provocative and difficult Bread of Life discourse, as he watches many walk away, I think Jesus really wants to know if the few who remain are willing to stay by his side. “Do you also wish to go away?”

“Lord, to whom can we go?” Simon Peter answers for all of them. “You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.”

And then, there were twelve.

But before we shake our heads at the disciples who go away and applaud those who remain for their shining example of faithfulness, let's not forget how this episode ends. “Did I not choose you, the twelve?” Jesus

responds to Simon Peter's confession of faith. "Yet one of you is a devil." Judas stands among the supposedly faithful remnant, but that will not prevent his ultimate betrayal. And, although Judas takes the most heat for his faithlessness, he is certainly not the only one to forsake Jesus in the end.

This moment at the heart of John's Gospel points to an important truth about discipleship. **Our faith, no matter how earnest, is uncertain. The question of staying with Jesus or leaving him is a constant for all of us, not just his first followers. And like them, we vacillate between conviction and doubt, between devotion and desertion.** To borrow the words of biblical scholar Karoline Lewis,

The juxtaposition of [Peter's confession] and [Judas' betrayal] is the very heart of our Christian faith, right? The simultaneity of witness to God and the inevitable abandonment of God is the crux of discipleship. We walk that line, we live on that line, each and every day, if we are honest. And there's no avoiding it, as much as we try, as much as we convince ourselves of our loyalty, as much as we tell others of our certainty, which is usually an attempt to convince [us of] our own.

... [As people of faith, we exist in a] space that represents both confidence and questions, both commitment and reticence, both enthusiastic confession and yet rational resistance. We are called to sit in these spaces... where there are no answers. No certainties. No guarantees. And then, to [lean] into those moments when the sense, so palpable, is that it could go one way or the other.¹

In other words, **we are all Simon Peter, clinging to Jesus as "the Holy One of God," even as we watch others walk away. And, we are all Judas,**

¹ "In Between Spaces," <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=5211>.

suspecting that faith is finally a fool's errand, and pursuing other, more certain options.

Author Rachel Held Evans describes her own discomfort living in the space between faith and faithlessness, even on the most celebratory day of the church year:

[Excerpt from *Searching for Sunday*, pp.186-88]

Can you hear any of your own experience in hers?

Dear church, **faith is not about posturing, or proving to yourself and others that you've got it all figured out. There's courage in naming your questions and fears, and continuing to show up in spite of them. After all, if it were certain, it wouldn't be called faith. No, to live on this side of eternity is to see through a glass dimly,² that is, to waver between confidence and uncertainty. Faith means to be claimed by Jesus in the first place,³ to be fully known, then to struggle day after day to grasp the mystery of God's purpose in him.**

² 1 Corinthians 13:12.

³ "Did I not choose you?"