

## Making St John's Great Again?

John 6:56-69

There's something I need to tell you . . . it's a confession of sorts, I guess.

I'm not the Messiah!

I'm sorry if you were hoping otherwise. Look, I know how it is . . . even when the last bloke was pretty good . . . still when the new pastor comes, things will change, right? Things will turn around. People will come flocking through the doors. He'll make St John's great again!

Okay . . . so, I know you don't think I'm the Messiah . . . do you? . . . but, still . . . there's that tiny stirring in your heart . . . wouldn't it be great to be a successful church? Wouldn't it be great to see this church filled . . . every Sunday! How good would that be? That would be a church worth belonging to. Hey, that same tiny stirring is in *my* heart too . . . wouldn't it be great to be the pastor of a successful church?! And, maybe I *am* the one? I wouldn't say that out loud ever . . . but there's that little stirring in my heart . . .

But . . . sadly . . . no, *thankfully!* . . . I am *not* the Messiah. Hey, who knows . . . perhaps this place *will* one day be full to overflowing . . . and that would truly be fantastic . . . but I won't be taking the credit for it. I'm just a bloke who preaches the gospel . . . and tries to live the gospel . . . I'm just another human being like you . . . and I am going to disappoint you . . . maybe I already have? And, I'm not going to have all the answers . . . or even know the right questions . . . and I might even offend you . . . banging on all the time about the same stuff: God's love . . . God's grace . . . God's forgiveness . . . "C'mon pastor, tell us something we didn't know! Tell us how to get bums on seats!"

Forgive me for putting it so crassly . . . but, in my defence I have to say I don't have the greatest role model. You see, there's this bloke called Jesus. This is a bloke who manages to reduce a crowd of 5000 . . . he had them eating out of his hand . . . to reduce that crowd of adoring fans to a handful of sniveling disciples in the space of a few days! Some mega-church pastor Jesus would have made!

Well, they were hoping *he* was the Messiah . . . you know . . . make Israel great again! And, it looked promising for a while. Jesus was doing the sort of things a Messiah should do . . . like miracles and wonders . . . but, then he started doing some weird stuff . . . hanging with the wrong crowd . . . and, saying some crazy things . . . crude, vulgar things really, like eating flesh and drinking blood . . . that's not what they wanted to hear . . . "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" they said . . . and he's obviously just a man . . . but, he claims to be from God! He claims to be God! That was the scandal! A hard word to take . . . so they walked away, because this wasn't the Messiah they were expecting . . . this wasn't the Messiah they wanted . . . this was not who God was. They were looking for something more from their Messiah . . . from their God, not something less. They wanted a Messiah who would make a difference to their world . . . at the very least, a Messiah who would drive out the Romans . . . even better, a Messiah who would help them drive out the Romans . . . restore control to them . . . make everything right for them in the world.

Maybe that's our story too? As Jesus' disciples . . . we come with our fears and expectations in a world that increasingly seems to be tearing apart . . . a world where we crave control yet seem to be losing control. And, isn't God s'posed to be all powerful? Isn't God so much bigger and better than us, up there in heaven? And, if only we could convince him to use some of that power to heal my illness . . . to stop my loneliness . . . to put an end to fighting . . . and to give me back control. Isn't that the God we want? The God we expect?

Instead we get Jesus . . . who talks about eating his flesh and drinking his blood! This is not the God of our imaginings . . . this is the God of flesh and blood. This is a human God. So, not God sitting up in heaven all powerfully pulling the strings, or not pulling the strings . . . who knows which? No, God who is literally in the world in the person of Jesus . . . in this chaotic, confusing, selfish, power-hungry world. God as a human being.

And, that's the scandal for us, isn't it? That God is one of us! Jesus representing God. Jesus representing us. That's the offense. Oh, we can handle it in theory . . . the idea of it is fine . . . but, when the chips are down . . . when we've got our backs to the wall . . . when life is unjust and unfair, in our heart of hearts we don't want a helpless, human God . . . we want a God who is better than that . . . bigger than that . . . more powerful than that. A God of justice! A God of control!

Instead what we have is Jesus. Jesus who knows loneliness. Jesus who knows rejection. Jesus who knows suffering. Jesus who knows death. But, Jesus who also knows life . . . life beyond death . . . resurrection life. Jesus who promises that life to those who abide in him . . . to those who remain with him . . . life right here and now . . . eternal life. That means it can't just be some sort of future offer of immortality . . . some sort of heavenly reward to look forward to . . . some sort of perfect Garden of Eden type of life . . . life without hassles, and pain, and annoyances, and struggle. No, this is an offer of God's life . . . a life of perfect, all embracing, all encompassing love . . . a life without fear! Imagine that! A life without fear. But, it's a life lived in the messiness, the uncertainty, the weakness of this world . . . because that's where God is.

Those who abide in Jesus have that life. It doesn't mean you won't be lonely, it means even in your loneliness life doesn't cease. It doesn't mean you won't be rejected, it means even when you are rejected life doesn't stop. It doesn't mean you won't get sick, it means even in sickness life goes on. It doesn't mean you won't die, it means, even in death life is certain. It means you have God's life.

Simon Peter was right, "To whom else can we go?" Only Jesus has the words of eternal life. That is the truth, but it is also a hard word for us to take in, so hard that despite those fine words even Peter didn't remain . . . he didn't abide . . . he walked away . . . they all did . . . at the sight of God on the cross . . . God dying . . . it was too much . . . it was not the God they expected. So, too will we walk away . . . many times . . . when it's too much. But, we can never get too far away from God who is always near . . . God who is here in the flesh . . . our flesh. God who keeps drawing us back to him . . . to again give us life. He does it again this morning. Jesus says: "This is my body . . . this is my blood . . . for you . . . take it . . . here is life . . . for you".

A God of flesh and blood. The Messiah. Messy . . . weak and human. That's our scandal. Will it put bums on seats? Will it make St John's great again? That I couldn't say. But, to whom else can we go? So, come . . . just

stretch out your hand . . . and then take that God of flesh and blood with you . . . flawed . . . failed . . . less than perfect . . . that's who we are . . . but we go believing in life . . . always believing in life.

Amen.

Pastor John Strelan  
St John's Lutheran Church, Unley  
Pentecost 14, 2024