

21st SUNDAY OF THE YEAR - B - 2006
“To whom shall we go?”

Paper or plastic? Butter, sour cream and chives? Mac or PC? Desk top or laptop? Compact or SUV? Satellite or cable? Read a book or watch TV? Ride a bus or take the car? Stay in this lane or change to the one that’s moving? Life is filled with choices. Some are big and some are small. Most are small, even trivial. But every once in a while, we have to make big ones. Pout or make up? Hold a grudge or forgive? Go to college out of state or stay home? Should I marry him or not? Should I take the new job or stay where I am? Should we add on to the house or move? Big questions. But no question we face is bigger or more critical than the one Jesus asked the Twelve in today’s gospel reading. *“Do you want to leave me, too?”*

Jesus had just told the crowds, *“I myself am the living bread come down from heaven. If anyone eats this bread, he shall live forever; the bread I will give is my flesh for the life of the world.”* And the people began to quarrel among themselves asking how he could give them his flesh to eat. In response, Jesus becomes even more emphatic. *“If you do not eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.”* They understand what he is saying. They get it! He’s saying that he’s going to give himself to them as food to eat and drink. *“And with that, many of his disciples broke away and would not remain in his company any longer.”* So Jesus turns to the Twelve and asks the question: *“Do you want to leave me, too?”* Everything hangs on their answer, everything. Jesus had been grooming them to continue his ministry when he was gone. If they walk, it’s all over. If they don’t, it’s the beginning of the greatest transforming, life-giving movement ever seen on earth.

Amid all the trivial and major decisions of our lives, each of us is still faced with the most important choice that any human being has ever faced: whether to acknowledge and serve God or not. And for us, that God became one of us in the person of Jesus Christ. And how we answer that question, *“Do you want to leave me, too?”* may even influence how we react when caught in traffic, where we decide to go to college, or how we choose the person we marry. It will have a major impact on how we view the world, how we look at life, and how we treat one another. It should impact the way we do business, the way we think about war, and our attitude toward the poor. It will determine how we raise our children, how we treat the stranger and how we face death, especially our own.

Now, if we believe that when we follow the way of life that Jesus taught us it would lead us to joy and peace, even eternal happiness, why would we ever choose to leave him? Well, it could be because of that cross that Jesus said we had to take if we were to be his followers, and who wants to suffer? Then, there are all those attractions that appeal to our desires, like for wealth, power, influence and pleasure. But I think there is a more fundamental reason. And it helps explain why many of his disciples grumbled in protest to what Jesus was saying about the Eucharist. *“How could anyone take it seriously?”*

Let’s go way back to the Garden of Eden. The tree that Adam and Eve were told not to eat from was the tree of _____ (Knowledge). And when they ate of it, they thought they would be like God. But it was a trick. As a result of their eating the forbidden fruit, they became confused, and were corrupted. But there was another tree in the Garden they could have eaten from. Remember what it was? The Tree of Life. God was giving everything to them and to us as a gift. All of creation was God’s gift

to us. All we had to do was accept the gift. But we choose to eat from the Tree of Knowledge instead. Rather than receiving everything as gift, we had to question everything. We began to act like we were gods, and everything had to fit into our way of seeing. I think this is a major reason we turn away from Jesus. He doesn't fit into our life, tainted as it is by the Original Sin.

In this 6th chapter of John's Gospel, Jesus is offering us the gift of the Eucharist, himself as our food and drink. Rather than try to figure it out, what if we just accepted the gift as it is offered to us? What if we just accepted St. Paul's teaching on marriage when he says, "*Defer to one another out of reverence for Christ?*" I know, we get all upset with the paternalistic influences about the role of the woman in relationship to her husband, so much so that we don't even hear that the husband is to treat his wife as Christ does the Church, by giving his life for her. What is being said here is that Jesus loves the us as his own body. Paul was not teaching social behavior as much as he was teaching theology. In other words, we are precious to Jesus, like a wife is precious to her husband. (And if your wife isn't precious to you, I think Paul is telling you that you have work to do!) Rather than argue with that, what if you could just accept it?!

It is not by accident that Jesus gives us his body in Holy Communion. It is meant to be an intimate act. We are not taking a spiritual pill, we are engaging in communion with our beloved. Don't fight it. Accept it! It could transform our lives. And we could be a part of that movement begun that day by the seashore when Peter said, "*Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe; we are convinced you are God's holy one.*" Or, to put this another way, we are choosing to eat from the Tree of Life. We are accepting the gift of life at last.