

Proper 16B – August 23, 2015
1 Kings 8:(1, 6, 10-11), 22-30, 41-43; Psalm 84; Ephesians 6:10-20; John 6:56-69
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Faith Journey: Going Away and Returning

My favorite professor in Divinity School was also my hardest, most challenging teacher, both in terms of what I was forced to grapple with and also in terms of work load. This venerable professor, a man named T.F. Torrance, stood just one degree of separation between me and his mentor, Karl Barth; and so, in Professor Torrance I encountered two of the great theologians of the 20th century. To me as a lowly student and foreigner in seminary in Edinburgh, Scotland, Professor Torrance was quite intimidating, and even more so when I started taking his courses. He had quite a following amongst students, and the faculty also treated him with considerable reverence. But many students found his teachings, and his teaching method, very hard, and because of that, some avoided him and his courses as much as they could.

In today's gospel reading, Jesus seems a little like my professor with his illustrious reputation and hard words. For the fifth week in a row, we dwell on John chapter 6, one extended metaphoric teaching by Jesus as being the "bread of life", "the living bread", the one whose "flesh is true bread and...blood is true drink."ⁱ

Jesus has had his own substantial following for his miracles and signs, as a healer and wonder-worker, and the crowds clamor for more signs and wonders! In our gospel reading, Jesus is in the synagogue providing additional meaning to his earlier multiplication of the loaves, teaching them about the living bread that comes down from heaven, and connecting that to himself. Jesus' metaphor reaches its full meaning this week as he states, "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them...the one who eats this bread will live forever." As the Incarnate One, he is flesh of our flesh and blood of our blood and promises to be present to the end of the age.ⁱⁱ But since most of the people are metaphorically challenged, and some were taking him too literally—and also, any notion of eating the blood of another was forbidden to them, because such life blood was considered sacred to Godⁱⁱⁱ—his hard teaching had a number clearing out of the room. And even those who understood the metaphor, namely that Jesus is the true source of sustenance and strength, and truly God in their very midst—and that the way he will give bread, give his flesh, his blood, will be through being "lifted up" on the cross—many of them also fell away, unable to commit to following him. Many of Jesus' followers, in fact, did turn back and no longer went about with him. So Jesus asks the twelve, "Do you also wish to go away?" And Simon Peter answers, "To whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life."

Yes but—yes, but discipleship is more complicated than playing "Follow the Leader;" for, in fact, we follow the Leader, but *also* fall away. Life as a disciple is more complicated than singing "I have decided to follow Jesus, No turning back, no turning back." As our gospel hymn today put it, "Bind my wandering heart to Thee. Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it, Prone to leave the God I love."^{iv} We know that Peter turned away even, and later, when

the chips were down, we read “Then *all* the disciples forsook him and fled.”^v In fact, the whole of church history with its divisions and reformations has been shaped by those who have also gone away, or split apart, for one reason or another. Peter himself was just the first of many to commit, only to go away at the first taste of fear in following Jesus all the way to the cross, denying him three times. “Do you wish to go away?” Even Peter goes away, but the good news is that Jesus does not go away from him. The Risen Jesus comes after Peter and the rest of the disciples who forsook him and fled, and invites them back. And we, too, are asked, “Do you also wish to go away?” Many of us do, and many of us will go. And the same Jesus continues to seek us out, wherever we may be.

I am one person in that long line of those who have gone away, only to find Jesus reaching out for me as I inched my way back. My journey avoiding Jesus was a long one, beginning with a somewhat shallow childhood church experience in which I had little sense of a Loving or Powerful Being looking out for me and my dysfunctional family, never mind the rest of the world. Having said that, though, I can also say that I had a loving mother who encouraged resiliency and modeled compassion, as well as a choir director who encouraged discipline and enabled me to experience church life and sacramental mystery wrapped in and around beautiful music. I then had the opportunity in my high school years to be at a school that invited open inquiry in all areas of life, including religious and philosophical thought. That was great, although I didn’t realize it at the time that this theological or religious inquiry equipped me mostly with language that reinforced and even masked an otherwise agnostic and even atheistic world view. It was interesting and mentally stimulating—a real head trip. But it did leave me wondering what might be missing. At that time I didn’t believe in, nor did I have the language to help me believe in, a God who became flesh of my flesh and blood of my blood, and who would seek me out. I still had little to go on as to who Jesus was and is, and was left feeling no closeness or relationship to a God who would act in personal and societal history.

I then went to a college where, on the one hand, a very similar and open, agnostic and even atheistic inquiry was taught, while, on the other hand, there was a quite “visible” Christian community of students on campus who were part of a group called the Campus Crusade for Christ. This group leaned in a very different direction, with a literalist interpretation of the Bible, and amongst that group there was not a lot of room for questions and doubt, but rather faith as certainty and a presumption that they were among the “saved,” and that folks like me with all my questions and doubts were not.

Do you also wish to go away? I sure did. I wanted to get away from both kinds of Christian expression—the dry academic *and* the passionate but narrow certitudes. It took me a few more years to figure out that it wasn’t Jesus I had left when I encountered, and then stepped back from, both of these approaches that fell far short of his gospel, his good, but hard, news. But like many who wander, I found I couldn’t stay away altogether. To whom could I go? Jesus had the words of eternal life. And so, I drifted into seminary, not with any initial sense of call to the ordained ministry, but definitely open to and hungry for something more than I had experienced up until then.

I eventually found myself nourished by Jesus in the flesh-and-blood groundedness of the incarnation story—the words of good news about a God who lived and died as one of us, now risen and loose in the world, and who wants to be known and wants to draw every person to himself, leaving no one behind. I even came back to the Church as well, for the rhythm of the church year, for its sacred seasons, for the sacramental mystery I had experienced in my early years, and for a community of fellow travelers, a community of faith that would welcome a seeker like me and help deepen my discipleship.

Do you also wish to go away? Many of us have gone away for any number of reasons—a traumatic church experience, damaging teaching, boring routines, dysfunctional community and on and on. It's important to make clear that it's not always Jesus himself we're going away from, as I've come to realize in my own journey. Watered-down or spun-out messages from the church and its leaders are often mistaken for the Gospel of Christ, Jesus' own words of eternal life. We want to go away when the church is ridiculed for, or scandalized by the messes we make ourselves, by our public, or more personal, infighting and our contradictory claims on the truth. We want to go away when pundits and reporters lump us all together under one label that does not fit our self-understanding at all. We want to go away when the church makes us angry or disappointed. We want to go away when the church breaks its promises—and it promises so much: love, forgiveness, welcome, inclusion, meaning, purpose, healing, safe haven, empowerment, prophetic witness, community, new life, release to the prisoner, good news to the poor, a place for everyone at the table! Needless to say, the church doesn't always live up to these promises.

And Jesus himself—he was not crucified because his teachings were easy. His ways are not our ways. His teaching *is* difficult. And this teaching about him as the bread, which if eaten, will bring eternal life, wasn't his only difficult teaching. He was unequivocal about the difficulty of following him: If someone asks you to go with him one mile, go with him two. Love your enemies. Pray for those who persecute you. Forgive not just seven times, but seventy-times-seven. Hard teaching? You bet it's hard. In fact, he turned more people off than he attracted—by the end of John's gospel, the crowd had dwindled from the 5,000+ at the multiplication of the loaves and fishes, down to eleven who had gone back to fishing until they saw him resurrected. *You* will want to go away sometimes. But here's the good news of today's gospel—a former colleague of mine, Elizabeth Garnsey, shares this brief story from the Talmud: “A son left his father [and went away]. He was asked to return but said, “I cannot return.” Then the father sent a message to the son [saying], “Return as far as you can, and I [will] come the rest of the way.”^{vi} Jesus' teaching about the bread and wine tells us the same thing, in a difficult class where even the serious students are also beginners, namely, there is always a way back, and the way back is not so difficult. Return as far as you can, to this table set for you. Come as you are from wherever you've been on your journey. You can belong here even before you believe. And Jesus will meet you here as you feed on him in your heart, by whatever faith you can muster, with even a little thanksgiving, and he will take you the rest of the way.

ⁱ As one interpreter of symbols writes,

“Jung...noted the intriguing parallels between the [ancient symbol of] the maternal Tree of Life and the human blood-system, observing how sap, imitating blood, cycles through the seasons, flowing down to its earthbound roots in winter and returning as fruit in summer, containing within its branching intricacies the entire mystery of life and death. Pulsing with paradox, blood evokes life’s precious value as long as it is contained within our bodies, but when it escapes in red-hot spurts, it congeals into a...haunting symbol of death. Spilled onto the ground, its innocent voice calls out to avenge [e.g.] Cain’s fratricide of Abel (Genesis 4:10)...From archaic notions of...a mass of congealed blood and from roots in countless taboos, dietary codes and sacrileges, blood resurges in the image of Christ’s life-blood [flowing] into a wine-chalice as he dies on a...tree of life. Communion wine is then imagined as blood circulating through the vine [who is Christ] to its branches [who are us]—the veins and arteries that...restore us to the transpersonal heart of all things.” (Quoted in “Blood” in *The Archive for Research in Archetypal Symbolism*, Ami Ronnberg and Kathleen Martin, eds., *The Book of Symbols: Reflections on Archetypal Images* (Cologne, Germany: TASCHEN, 2010), p. 396).

ⁱⁱ Matthew 28:20

ⁱⁱⁱ See Leviticus 17:10-14; Deuteronomy 12:16, 24

^{iv} Hymn 686 “Come, thou fount of every blessing” *The Hymnal 1982* (New York: The Church Hymnal Corporation), v. 3

^v Matthew 26:56; Mark 14:50

^{vi} Elizabeth Garnsey, “Return as far as you can” (New York: St Bartholomew’s Church, Aug. 2006)