

We know that Jesus loved to heal the sick, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, rescue the accused, and generally come to the aid of those who were poor and marginalized. Scripture also shows him taunting the powerful, harassing the self-righteous, and generally offending those who rejected him and his mission of reconciliation and salvation. Jesus was adept at telling people what they didn't want to hear — and being what they didn't want to have. So it's no wonder that the days of large crowds following him, hanging on his every word, and threatening to take him away to make him king came to an end.

Today we reach the climax of the “bread of life” discourse and we are reminded that Jesus delivered that discourse not to an authorized biographer but to a community in Capernaum, a town on the Sea of Galilee that served as something of a base of operations for Jesus in his early public ministry. We are used to hearing Jesus talk about himself as the bread of life, very much so after the last few weeks, but today we are reminded that those words were once new, and we learn how the first people to hear them reacted.

Many of those who had followed the charismatic young rabbi complained and rejected his teaching, and ceased to follow him. That was completely understandable, because the notion of eating human flesh and drinking human blood was just as repugnant to them as it would be to us, and for them it also would have been a grave violation of religious law. They were so turned away by the image that they didn't stick around to learn more about how those offensive words could be spirit and life.

That's not to say that those who turned away were bad and those who stuck with him were good. Most of the close-knit inner circle of Jesus's followers would fail him, abandon him, deny even knowing him, and one of those followers would betray him. Jesus himself said that discipleship was a gift from God, so while we can say that those who deny Jesus's teachings about himself are wrong, we can *not* say that those who don't follow him are evil.

Quite the contrary: the most serious attacks on Jesus come from those who do know him. Those who turned away didn't betray him, but the demons who knew Jesus is the Son of God tried to pick fights — and we know how those turned out. Similarly, while the Church has tended to thrive in places and times when it has been persecuted, her own worst enemies have always come from within. You can't make Jesus into an accuser or a priggish enforcer of a superficial purity code if you don't know who he is or don't think he's important. You can't warp his message of redemption, love, and radical inclusivity into a dark mirror image if you've never heard it. And, before we risk pulling a muscle from patting ourselves too forcefully on the back, let us not forget that we are not immune to this disease.

The temptation always remains to put away those things about Jesus, his message, or his story that challenge us. To make peace with our own sense of offendedness by editing out or explaining around what we can't stomach. When we do

this, we aren't following Christ, "For to believe what you please, and not to believe what you please, is to believe yourselves, and not the gospel," as St. Augustine said. And we all too easily worship the more palatable substitutes we invent and label "Jesus," and even defend them against suggestions that they are what they are.

Or to come at it from a different angle, a follower, by definition, doesn't choose the route. For one thing, we don't have the authority to change the truths Jesus revealed to us. For another, when we choose a different route, we will inevitably get lost. Just because Jesus loves the lost doesn't mean we won't feel silly when he comes back and picks us up. We might even feel... sheepish?

None of this is to deny the very real difficulties many passages and doctrines pose for many people. But God knows us so well and loves us so much that God makes provision for these difficulties. God doesn't give us the gift of discipleship without also giving us the other spiritual gifts that allow us to remain faithful disciples: the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit, the wisdom and support of the local and the universal Church, the gifts of knowledge, courage, discernment, and wisdom. God grants us these gifts in abundance, equips us with spiritual armor, that we might declare boldly the truth God has revealed to us.

We see these gifts at work in the reaction of the twelve disciples who did stay faithful to Jesus. My favorite thing about this story is how the disciples say, unambiguously, that they are having a hard time with Jesus's teaching, and Jesus doesn't scold them or send them away, he stays in relationship with them and elaborates on his teaching. And then they respond by reaffirming their commitment to Jesus and giving voice to their newly-strengthened faith.

Like them, when we encounter aspects of our tradition that are difficult for us, we shouldn't be afraid to be honest about our discomfort. We should only be afraid of lying to ourselves about who God is, and thereby confusing ourselves and distancing ourselves from God. Telling God and trustworthy people that we're having a hard time with our faith is itself an act of faith. Being honest about our struggles and doubts keeps us in relationship with God and proves that we know the most important thing about God, that he is gracious and loving, and longs to bring us closer. When we do share our struggles, we can expect not only relief from the burden of them, but something truly wonderful. Like the disciples, we can expect God to meet us where we are and graciously lead us into a deeper relationship with God.

The light of Christ that shines in the darkness, the light that darkness cannot overcome, is the same light that dwells within us and causes truth to shine while dispelling the darkness of falsehood and corruption. Those who faithfully serve the Lord, and those who serve only themselves through the charade of a god of their own design, will be revealed plainly by the same light of Christ. So choose to serve the Lord. Better to put on the whole armor of God than to be caught with your trousers down.