

“Grandma, What is Heaven Like?”

Sermon by Rev. James Brassard

Scripture: John 6:47-66 “*Those that eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.*”

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Jesus liked to ask hard questions. He liked to ask the kind of in -your-face questions that force you to make some choices about **who you are**. These were periodic “gut checks” where he gauged if those following him were ready to “walk the walk” or were they just uncommitted bystanders. The net affect of these hard questions was that many people who were following him for the free lunch, the amazing walk on water miracles, or the spectacular healing, just walked away...leaving Jesus with a much smaller, but far more effective, band of followers who eventually transformed the world.

We find in the sixth chapter of John a series of hard questions that winnowed down his audience. Scholars call it the “Bread of Life Sermon”. In John 6 Jesus explains to his followers the **challenges** they will face if they are going to follow him. Those of us that know the ending—Jesus will end up on a cross, his flesh torn and his blood poured out—know why he was so forthright. Jesus shares the small print up front: To follow him will require significant cost---sacrifice and commitment.

You know I love Mark Twain. He once said, “**its not the parts of the Bible I don't understand that bother me, it's the parts I do understand that bother me.**”

Like Twain the disciples were bothered by his candor, said so -

“This is a hard saying? How can I take it in?”

Most cut and ran: Verse 66 says

“From that time many of his followers turned back and no longer followed him.”

The Question—then and now is the same. Are you going to be a **religious consumer** or a **follower of Jesus? Choose now!**

Before going further I want to explain the references to Moses. Moses led the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt and took them towards the land God promised. Unfortunately they had to walk through the barren dessert to get there. Since nothing grows in the dessert and no one was supplying them with food---it was a dangerous journey. But God taught the Israelites to be trusting consumers. “What is it?” was a sticky, pasty stuff. Not very tasty but it was sustenance. When you are really hungry, as the Israelites were, you will eat it.

God had a purpose in mind in putting the Israelites through the long journey and providing them with daily reminders of his care. God wanted to teach them what is at the heart of the Lord's Prayer—“give us this day our daily bread.” God wanted them to trust him for their daily sustenance. It fed them but they missed the greater lesson of learning to trust God. When they finally get near the border, Moses sends in twelve spies to survey the land and to report about its current occupants. The spies return and an overwhelming majority, ten of the twelve, said the people currently in the land were monsters and dangerous and the land was an unproductive wasteland. “Forget about it—take us back to Egypt.”

Only two—Joshua was one—argued that the Israelites should go in and inhabit the land. They reported that the land was prosperous, “flowing with milk and honey,” and shared stories of grapes that were more luscious than anything grown in Egypt. Because the people doubted God the people died in the desert. Even those who ate the manna died short of the goal.

Jesus said that those who feast on him—trusting him with all aspects of their lives—they will never die but have eternal life.

Douglas Rumsford describes what he calls the religious consumers that make up the masses of Christians in America. He says religious consumers view faith as a means of self-enrichment and self-satisfaction. In other words, my commitment to faith is based on what it does for me, on how it benefits me.

This is not all bad. There are some wonderful benefits of being a Christian. I am grateful for grace. I relish the freedom of knowing that no matter what I may have done, no matter how bad it may seem to me, no matter how guilty I may feel over it--that God's love and forgiveness is extended to me. That is indeed priceless!

I am also grateful in knowing that God cares for me. I love that as Travis's children's sermon told us, that God sent Jesus to show us how to live. I am sincerely grateful for the benefits of being a believer in Jesus Christ.

But sometimes I am not ready for the **responsibilities in making Jesus first in my life.**

Rumsford says that religious consumers are driven by their needs rather than God's purposes. In other words, as we see in the 6th chapter of John, as long as Jesus is serving 5000 happy meals, you can count them in. It was when he called them to sacrifice and commitment that they headed back down the mountain and headed back home.

I have talked often about my 4 year old niece Melissa. She lives in California and visits my Mom almost every day. After a week of Vacation Bible School where they talked at length and in glowing language about heaven she came and wanted to ask her grandmother about heaven. You could guess her reasoning. Grandma is Christian and grandma is old—she must have visited heaven.

Melissa asked, “Grandma what is heaven like? “

“I don't know,” my mother responded. “Why not?”

“Well, Melissa, I haven't been there.” “Why not?”

“You have to die first to go to heaven?” “YOU DO! They didn't tell us about that!”

Funny...but Melissa had been told about the streets of gold but not the cost of the cross.

I can't remember what business leadership book it came out of. I remember it well. The authors stated that one of the foundational principals of business is this: **THAT ALL GROWTH STOPS WHEN THE PRICE GETS TOO HIGH.**

Growth stops when we're unwilling to add staff or commit precious resources or take risks. That's why vision and sensible risk taking and patience are such critical leadership qualities.

Growth stops when the price gets too high.

What is true for business and organizational leadership is also true in our faith journeys.

When I am required to move out of my commitments and my comfort zone,

When I am required to give a piece of my heart that I've been holding back for me,

When I want God to be compartmentalized in my life and God is asking me to open the door,
When the price of following Jesus gets higher than I am willing to pay,

THAT IS WHEN GROWTH STOPS.

I am sure I am not the only one who sometimes wonders why I feel flat spiritually.

Why don't I feel like I am getting anywhere? Why does God feel a long way off?

Usually it is because I am unwilling to commit and actively follow Christ. I move from follower to consumer---keep blessing me Lord and making my life easy.

Come on God—what have you done for me lately!!!

Even in the church there is the **pay the rent**---manna like life. Keep programs running. Keep cranking out twenty-minute sermons with lots of calming and comforting biblical insight to serve out each Sunday morning.

This challenge from Jesus says to me: Beware of going through the motions spiritually.

Beware of the tendency to keep Jesus at a safe distance--- to only call on him when you need something but don't offer your life as a servant.

I am reading a book entitled, “**Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religions and the problem of Race in America.**” James Emerson has some sobering messages. “The organization of American religion encourages religious groups to cater to people's existing preferences, rather than their ideal callings. The people in a congregation usually look for their Christian leaders and their church to fulfill their needs rather than demand real change. “

It is quite natural in voluntary organizations for people to seek meaning and belonging with the least possible change---just as material consumers we are taught to seek the greatest benefit for the least cost. Emerson also reports that the biggest cause of burnout among clergy (add highly motivated lay people) is that they see the church as an institution **challenging** people to new views and courageous action (like Jesus does) while the laity see the church as a **source of comfort** in a **troubled world**.

“Most people in American churches are essentially **consumers instead of producers of the church's love and concern for the world. Besides that the lay people** resent the effort to remake the church into a love producing agent”

His research went on to confirm that the most popular religious groups in a local area—measured by membership figures—are the least likely to take an active role in changing the status quo.

The sad fact is that Christian faith—with such great potential to unify people divided by race and class—almost always serves to reinforce the racial and social divide that afflicts our nation.

I doubt if the people Jesus confronted were converted to his “harder calling” immediately. Conversion is really a lifelong process of letting God remove the scales from our eyes so that we can more and more embrace the reality of God's overwhelming love for us. We act boldly only when we feel secure in that overwhelming love.

Norman Vincent Peale was one of the most positive preachers of the 20th century---the model from which Robert Schuler and Joel Osteen spring. Peale had a friend from Lebanon named Musa Alami. Musa lived in the desert near the Jordan River not far from Jericho. Musa had a dream, based on his acquaintance with irrigation projects in other parts of the world, to see the Jordan River Valley blossom

and flourish with crops. Other people looked at the bleak desert landscape and laughed at Musa's dream. But with a few poor refugees from the Jericho refugee camp, Musa began to dig in the desert, not with a steam shovel or earthmovers, but with picks and shovels. After six months of grueling labor in the desert, Musa and his motley crew finally struck water deep under the desert sand. When fresh water began to fill up the hole they had dug, Musa didn't shout or cheer. He was so overwhelmed he wept, because God had blessed his dream with success.

Today, thousands of acres are yielding fruits and vegetables in abundance because of one man's persistent dream and his faith in the blessing below the earth.

Isn't that just like God? If we dig beneath the surface of the desert landscape of our lives, God will bring blessings gushing forth—abundant and refreshing and productive. That is God's promise.

Jesus once said, “Ask and it will be given unto you, seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds, to her who knocks, the door will be opened.” (Matthew 7:7-8)

Our problem is that we don't open our lives for all the blessings God wants us to have. I don't know if it's ignorance or lack of faith or fear in letting go –but most of us act like the man who had just moved to the country and bought himself a cow. He came to the feed store one day complaining that his cow was going dry. The feed storeowner asked him if he was feeding her right.

“I'm just doing what you told me to do,” the man replied.

“Are you milking her everyday?”

Just about, the city slicker replied. “If I need a cup of milk for breakfast, I go out and get it. Of course, if I don't need any milk, I don't milk her; I just let her store it up.”

The feed storeowner had to explain that it didn't work that way. To get a cow to produce abundant milk, you have to **milk her completely everyday**.

Yeah it was a hard saying.

Yeah it thinned the ranks dramatically.

Those looking for ecstasy instead of transformation jumped ship.

So did those who wanted the warmth of the womb instead of a new birth.

The bargain hunting religious consumers left for a better deal elsewhere.

In verse 66, the crowd makes their way down the hill. Some go slowly. Others leave probably as fast as they can go. Then Jesus turns to you and says,

“What about you? Are you with me or not?”