



Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Coeur d'Alene Rev. Katy Shedlock

1 Kings 8:[1, 6, 10-11], 22-30, 41-43

Ephesians 6:10-20

John 6: 56-69

Psalm 84

Jesus has started a revolution. A revolution of love. A revolution of compassion for the last, the least, and the lost. A revolution of justice where the hungry are fed. A revolution of joy where the wine never runs out.

Crowds are gathering. Miracles are happening. It really does seem like the Kingdom of God is at hand.

And then the momentum shifts. The vibes start to change. The fallout has begun.

Up until this point, Jesus has had almost no resistance to his ministry. We're only in the 6th chapter of John's Gospel, after all. So far, he has collected a few disciples, gotten a swift kick in the pants from his mother to get started already, had some intriguing conversations with the rabbi Nicodemus in the middle of the night, converted all of Samaria through the testimony of the woman at the well, healed people, and fed thousands from five loaves and two fish. So far, even the people who aren't sure about him, like Nicodemus, are still curious enough to listen. They're unconvinced but hovering on the edges. And most of Galilee, it seems, is completely enthralled by everything he does.

Until today. He is explaining, again, that he is the bread of life, the living bread that came down from heaven, and whoever eats of his flesh and drinks of his blood will live, and remember without the context of the last supper or the Eucharist, this is a really shocking and strange thing for Jesus to say, and maybe the first three or four or ten times people were willing to let it go, but he keeps bringing it up, and finally people start to voice their objections: "This teaching is difficult. Who can accept it?"

The point of this sermon is not "Don't be like one of those flaky disciples who gives up when the going gets hard." The point of this sermon is that even Jesus had lonely days of wondering who was with him. And the Good News is that sometimes God gives us the most surprising people who get it.

This week as I sat with the text, I was haunted by Jesus's question "Do you also wish to go away?" The Gospel writer John tells us that Jesus asked this of the twelve after many disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. "Do you also wish to go away?"

There's something so plaintive, so sad in that question. Jesus was fully divine, yes, but he was also fully human, and I feel the rejection that he is experiencing on a visceral level. Maybe, just maybe, just a little bit, he had started to let the crowds, and the excitement go to his head. Maybe he had started to believe that this would be easier than he thought. He had resisted getting started for so long, but now, look at them all! How hungry they all were - for God, for him, for hope. Maybe he had underestimated his

fellow human beings - maybe they really did want to live as citizens of heaven, rejoicing in God's goodness and living accordingly.

And then the sudden, swift unraveling. The smaller and smaller crowds. The dwindling attendance when he came to speak at the synagogues. Until he looked around and had to ask, although I'm sure he didn't want to hear the answer, "Do you also wish to go away?"

Maybe he looked at who was left and hoped they would say yes so he could just start over completely! After all, in the Gospel of John, the call stories of the disciples are not the faithful, "drop-your-nets and follow me" stories we get in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. In John, the first disciples of Jesus are actually followers of John the Baptist, who tells them "Look, there's the Son of God, the one we've been waiting for." The other disciples who get called by name, Philip and Nathanael, are both overly skeptical and overly credulous in their call stories. Whenever Peter gets mentioned up to the point of today's text, he's always just "Andrew's brother," which suggests to me that Andrew was the important one of the two of them, and Peter was just along for the ride.

Until this moment. Jesus asks, "Do you also wish to go away?"

And Peter - lackluster, unassuming, kid-brother Peter - says "Lord to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life."

In that moment, Peter is saying to Jesus, "I believe in you." Not in some dogmatic, confessional, catechismal way, but the way we believe in our closest friends.

Maybe you or someone close to you has done something big and risky and public like start a business or run for office or unionize your workplace or say yes to an opportunity that is both exciting and terrifying at the same time. Maybe you or someone close to you has committed time, money, energy, and relationships to a cause of some kind and asked for the support of the people around you. Maybe you have had moments of being surprised by who is with you. Maybe you have had moments of believing in someone else when others have fallen away.

I have spent the last 7 years of my life as a church planter. Church planting is public and risky business - try inviting people to a church that doesn't exist yet in a cultural moment of denominational decline when most congregations are shrinking, and most new churches fail. That's the language for when church plants stop meeting - failure. In July of 2017 I was tasked by the United Methodist bishop under whom I worked to start a new congregation in Spokane. I had no idea how to do the job I had just been given, but I had passed several hilarious multiple-choice tests published by some Baptist publishing house to evaluate potential church planters. I remember calculating that I had "saved" maybe 20 people, by which I meant had a vaguely theological conversation of some kind with them.

So under these not very promising auspices, I got started in my new job and started having conversations with anyone who would talk to me about starting a new congregation in Spokane. I started fundraising. I started doing monthly experimental services with a small group of people that included poetry and storytelling and unconventional music.

And from the jump, the people who believed in me were not the people I expected. My initial group of leaders were all former evangelicals whose previous experiences with Christianity were totally foreign to me. When we started to realize that making it very clear that our new congregation would be queer affirming, which in the United Methodist Church at that time was a controversial risk, some of the most conservative Methodists in town sent us checks. When I was having trouble explaining our experimental services to some of the local Methodist leadership, an older gentleman who I rarely agreed with, but who had a lot of clout said "I get it, and I think what they're doing is great. It's like Hamilton. Hamilton is the story of our nation's founding but it's presented in ways that young people get excited about. That's what they're doing with church and I think it's wonderful."

And I certainly never expected, given our very wild and creative approach to liturgy, that the Episcopalians, of all people, would get really excited about what we were doing and be incredibly generous and enthusiastic about adopting us.

Here is what I have learned over the last 7 years about the gift of people believing in me as a church planter: it is never the people I expected. And I have come to understand that it's never the people I expected because God's imagination is so much bigger than mine. My heart, my assumptions, my plans all have to change when I am presented with the support and encouragement of someone I did not expect to step forward.

I think this is especially important in ministry because after all, the ministry isn't mine. It belongs to God. I just have the honor of shepherding it along for a season. And when I have the affirmational experience of people believing in me, what they're really saying is "I believe in what you're trying to do here. I can see how you're trying to embody and incarnate and make real and alive the love and presence of God here on earth."

I think a healthy church community is one where we believe in one another. I think a healthy church community is one where we boldly try new things to make the love of God real and alive. Not everything will work, but on our down days when it feels like the energy is gone and the crowds have disappeared, do we believe that someone might still believe in us? Are we open to the idea that someone might be the last person we expected?

I firmly believe that when we are participating in the revolution of love that Jesus initiated, somebody, somewhere will believe in us. All it takes is one lackluster, unassuming, kid brother. I firmly believe God delights in sending us unexpected people to see just how open we are to expanding our imaginations of what's possible.

When I was a Methodist church planter, I had to send in lots of reports in which I was asked questions about how I was growing my congregation and meeting new people. What I eventually started realizing, every time I sat down to write one of these reports, was that when I thought through each new person who had recently come to the Abbey, each one of them walked through the doors as a result of some mysterious combination of factors that only God could have designed. I started to truly believe that it

was God who sent us new people. But they stayed because they believed in us and how we were trying to participate in Christ's loving revolution.

I think even Jesus was surprised at who believed in him. And I think if his experience was anything like mine, his faith was strengthened in a whole new way when Peter said, "We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God." May it be so. Amen.