



SAINT JAMES'
EPISCOPAL CHURCH
Fremont, California

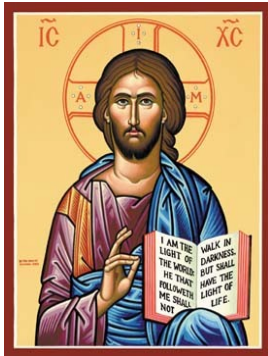
SERMON

23 August, 2009. Pentecost 12,

Title: "Disciple Drop Out"

Text: St. John 6:56-69

J.J.



Christ the Teacher

Today's Gospel is the last Sunday for John, chapter 6. For five Sundays, we have been hearing about Jesus feeding the five thousand, and how Jesus is the "Bread of Life," and all of the hullabaloo that started. In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus says "where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them;" well it's clear in John's Gospel that where two or three are gathered to hear Jesus, there is a controversy (and we heard a lot about that last Sunday). What caught my attention in today's reading, however, was those closing words—"many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him." I found a sermon based on these words, a sermon by The Rev. Peter Perry . . . a narrative sermon—and you know how much I love stories—and so, this morning, I want to tell you his story.

Good morning. My name . . . well, that's not really important, I guess. Yes, know it . . . you wouldn't remember me. Maybe if I had done things differently back then, I would be right up there with Peter and James and John. Hey, maybe I could even have written a Gospel like Matthew, Mark or Luke! But that was not to be . . . Who could have known how things would have turned out? Or what might have been? It was a crazy time. I was young. I was curious . . . ah, but I wasn't committed.

I first met Jesus at a wedding in my home town. You've heard of it, I'm sure . . . Cana! It was a big wedding . . . important families . . . whole town turned out . . . everyone was having a good time . . . it was a great party . . . and then they ran out of wine. Can you imagine? Well, the party was about to break up, when Jesus came along and somehow provided more wine. And, I got to tell you, it was some of the best wine I've ever tasted . . . never before or since. Some say it was a miracle. Others say Jesus just knew where to find it. The head waiter, however, swears that he and his staff filled those flasks with water, and when Jesus poured out a glass, it was wine . . . And so the party continued.

Oh, Jesus knew how to party all right! He was not like those stuffy priests in Jerusalem or those barefoot doomsayers down by the Jordan. No. He was a party guy. My kind of guy. I think that's what first got my attention. Jesus knew how to have a good time. And when he talked about God, it wasn't all that heavy, oppressive, guilt stuff. No, it was fun. He could tell a great story. He could make you laugh. He could make you cry. It just felt good to be around him . . . it felt right . . . you know what I mean?

And then Jesus left. He went to Jerusalem for the Passover and if you believe the stories, he really put the priests in their places. He overturned the tables of the moneychangers and drove all of the sacrificial animals out of the Temple plaza. "Don't turn God's house into marketplace!" he said. Our local rabbi was calling Jesus a rabble-rouser and a trouble-maker, but when I heard that story I thought to myself, "Hey, this is my kind of dude and my kind of religion!" On the way back, he went through Samaria and started preaching there. And boy, let me tell you, the purists were absolutely offended. "We are the chosen people, God's elect! Telling the Samaritans about God is like dressing a dog in fine linens." But, you know, I kind of liked the idea. Seems to me that's exactly what the prophets had been telling us for years that God was God of us all, of the Jews, of the Samaritans, even of the Romans.

One day, there was some shouting in the streets. Some young kids hollering that Jesus was back in town. Well, I dropped everything and ran to find him . . . and sure enough, half the town was there. There was even one of the king's officers. He asked Jesus to come with him to Capernaum to heal his son, who was dying. Jesus simply told him to go home and that he would find his son well. And you know what, the next day the officer sent a message to Jesus telling him that his son's fever had broken at the precise time that Jesus told him that his son would be OK. Wow! Can you believe that! Well, there had been just too many coincidences with this Jesus: miracles, and wonderful stories, and new teaching . . . work was slow . . . and I was looking forward to a little road trip . . . and so when Jesus left Cana, I went with him. And let me tell you, I saw some incredible

things: I saw the lame walk, the blind see, the deaf hear. I was there when thousands of hungry people were fed. Signs and wonders I couldn't explain. I wanted some time to think about all of this . . . but there was no time. Life with Jesus wasn't going to be just one long party . . . Jesus had work for us to do. We had to feed the hungry and care for the sick and teach the young and comfort the old and dying. Not everyone who asked for a miracle got one. Not every town we visited welcomed us. The days were hot in the sun and the nights cold.

Now, Jesus was surrounded by disciples like me. He taught us and the crowds of would-be disciples so many things . . . and, we hung on every word he spoke, trying to understand, trying to believe . . . but, oh, his sayings were hard. It wasn't enough for Jesus that we kept the law. He really expected us to love each other. He talked about sacrifice, his sacrifice and our sacrifice . . . how we were to lay down our lives for one another. Really! And the things he claimed. I know why it troubled the rabbis. It was almost as if Jesus was saying that he was God. He claimed that God had sent him, and that God was in him. And, he said, God could be in us, too . . . and that, we too, would live forever. But, in order for that to happen, we had to eat God's flesh and drink God's blood. Jesus told us that he was the bread of life. "Eat my body," he said, "and you won't be hungry again" . . . "Drink my blood and you won't be thirsty again." And that was too much. It was all very, very confusing. And, try as I might, I couldn't understand what Jesus was talking about. So one night, as I drifted off to sleep, I decided that it was time to get back to work . . . time to end this road trip . . . and head home.

I left the next morning. I guess you could call me a "Discipleship Drop Out." And, I wasn't alone. There were others who, like me, couldn't put all the pieces together. I mean, we liked Jesus and all that. Hey, we even believed some of it, at least I did, that God had really and truly sent him. But this mystical stuff, eating and drinking God, I just couldn't wrap my mind around that. So I left, along with some others. And that's where I'm mentioned in the Bible, in your Gospel reading for today where it says, "Many of his disciples left him."

I went back to work, but I continued to hear the stories about Jesus. And then I heard about that Friday when they crucified him. How the soldiers mocked him. How the people betrayed him. How he hung there, between two thieves, promising paradise as he died. That night, I prayed long and hard . . . my mind filled with the image of Jesus on a cross. "What a waste," I said to God. "If you sent him, why did you let him die." And suddenly, as if in answer to my question, the image in my mind changed from Jesus on the cross to a lamb on the altar. And all of the teachings of Jesus about sacrifice came flooding back into my mind, and I began to understand. I began to understand that Jesus was himself a sacrifice. It was as though he had to die in order to live. Life . . . death . . . sin . . . sacrifice . . . forgiveness . . . it was all wrapped up in Jesus.

Well, you know the rest of the story. The cross could not defeat God. The grave could not hold Jesus. As it turns out, Jesus was the life of the party after all. Like he said, in him was life that would never end. I still don't understand it all, but it makes more sense to me now, after Easter, than it did before. If we want to live, we need to share in this sacrifice that is Jesus.

Oh, and about that discipleship drop out stuff. I admit it. I turned away when the going got tough. But I came back and that's OK. Jesus knows that it can be hard to be a disciple. But I know it's hard **not** to be a disciple. I'm convinced that the sacrifice we are called to share as disciples of Jesus is worth it. And so now, I spend my time helping others become disciples. I teach the children. I feed the hungry. I reach out to the sick and the lonely and the frightened. I comfort the dying and the mourning. I seek justice and peace. I don't always know what I'm doing, but I try to do what Jesus did. I blew one chance at being a disciple. I won't ever make that mistake again. Well, never say never! But even if I should wander for a time, I know that God, and God's people, will welcome me back with open arms.

God sent Jesus to me, that he might live in me, and I might live in him . . . Forever! And God has sent Jesus for you, too. I think there's room for a few more disciples. Won't you join me?

S.D.G.

Based on a sermon by Rev. Peter K. Perry, © 2003
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