

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
8/23/2009, Pentecost 12B
Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18, Psalm 34:15-22, John 6:56-69
Walking away from Jesus

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

⁶⁶Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. (John 6:66, NRSV)

Yesterday in this Gospel story, Jesus had a large congregation -- more than five thousand souls. (John 6:1ff) He had come away to a quiet place on a mountain, but the multitudes had followed him. He had lifted his eyes, beheld the great company coming unto him, and had fed them all. His provisions had been meager - five loaves of bread and two small fish - but even a small amount is enough, and more than enough, in the hands of the very Bread of Life. So, he had multiplied the loaves and the fishes and fed that multitude.

They, in turn, followed him. When he left that place and crossed the Sea of Galilee, they hastened there:

When the people therefore saw that Jesus was not there, neither his disciples, they also took shipping, and came to Capernaum, seeking for Jesus. (John 6:24, KJV)

So, they found our Lord there in Capernaum, and he preached to them -- only the preaching seems not to have gone well. Yesterday he fed five thousand followers. Alas, today only twelve remain. Aye, and one of them will betray him. What a disaster for a preacher, to have gone from five thousand people down to just twelve.

The multitude is walking away from Jesus. Let us take a stroll with two or three of that multitude. Let us walk for a while beside them and try to understand their thinking. And then, after considering their thoughts, let's try to give some answer, both for their sake and for the sake of Christ. Let's walk with a plain man, a sinner, and an atheist.

The Plain Man

We begin with a plain man. Yonder fisherman: he is heading back to his marshes and nets and boats. Let us go with him for a while and try to learn his mind.

"I am just a plain man," he says. "I understand tides and currents and inlets in the Sea. I understand nets and boats, sails and wind and the migration pattern of fish. I understand sickness and sorrow over the passing of friends. I understand bread in my belly. Indeed, it seems that I have never really had enough bread and

fish in my belly, for I have been a poor man all my life, and now I am grown old, still struggling to put bread on the table for my family. I understand many practical things, but I do not follow all this *philosophy*, all this talk of eternal life and manna that does not fail and coming down from heaven. These things are high and abstract and I cannot follow them.

“This Jesus: he comes from these parts. He grew up in here in Galilee, in Nazareth, they say, which is not far from this town, Capernaum. I do not know his folks, but I’ve heard that he comes from good stock, from Joseph, a respected carpenter, and Mary, whom everybody loves. I have nothing against Jesus. It is just that I am a plain man who worries about food for his family. I am not learned, I am not clever, I am not a philosopher, I cannot follow what Jesus is saying about the Bread of Life and about eating his flesh and about abiding in him, and he in us.

“I came to that mountain on the other side of the sea because I had heard about the wonders Jesus had done -- how he had changed water into wine¹, raised up the nobleman’s son², and healed the crippled man at the pool near the Sheep Gate of the Temple.³ I took time off from my fishing to seek out Jesus. I was there along with the five thousand. I ate that wonderful meal, that miracle of a meal, when I and the others ate our fill with twelve baskets of food leftover. I was there for that, and it *thrilled* me! Bread is what I need! Bread is what my family needs, what so many poor people in this world need. But Jesus soon turned from bread and the hunger in our bellies and began speaking of lofty topics I guess the priests and rabbis can understand, but not me. I cannot linger for these spiritual conversations. I must return to my marshes, to my nets, to earning my bread by the sweat of my brow. I have a family to take care of. I had hoped that Jesus could help me, but his concerns seem to be different from mine.”

So, that is the plain man. We have heard his thinking. It is moving and human, and I think one must not hasten to answer too quickly, as if not really entering into what he has said. But eventually there comes a time to speak, and let me try to give some reply to the plain man:

“Dear Sir, you are not able to see the whole picture now. No one can, because it is still too early in the story of Jesus. But if you could look ahead, if you could see the story of humanity stretching forward through the ages, you would discover that many of the matters on your heart are also the matters on the heart of Jesus and of millions upon millions of people who will try to live in his name. Look around you. You are blessed to part of Israel, along with its long traditions of compassion and concern for the poor. But going forward, those who bear the name of Jesus will also do some mighty deeds in this world. They will practice almsgiving, yes, and not in a dilettante way, but as an essential part of life in Christ. They will establish hospitals and universities. They will establish orphanages. They will refuse to participate in the exposure of infants. The rich

¹ John 2:1-11

² John 4:46-52

³ John 5: 1-9

Christian and the beggar Christian will learn to shake hands and exchange the Peace in the Sacred Liturgy. Such things are unheard of in the ancient world, that a working man in rough clothing should look the rich man in the eye and count him a brother – a brother in Christ.

Things will change because this Jesus, from whom you now walk away, is a man who cares deeply about practical matters. He loves the orphan, the widow, the widower. His eye is especially upon the sick, the poor, the homeless, the hungry, and the prisoner. He honors the elderly and will not shove them aside. Alas, much will be done in his name that is wicked and blasphemous, yet those who really study him, commune with him, and try to walk in his spirit will do much good in this world.

“If you walk away, my friend, how is that going to make your world any better? If you walk away from Jesus, do you think you will be better fed because of that? Do you think that you will live a more noble life by abandoning him? Do you think that you will find more comfort in life if you leave Jesus behind?”

“Recall the ancient promises of Israel. Think of Psalm 34, for example. Recall this verse:

¹⁸ The Lord is near to the | brokenhearted*
and will save those whose spir- | its are crushed.

“Might I suggest to you that we have found this One who is near to the brokenhearted. We have found him who hears the cries of the righteous and delivers them from all their troubles. He is this man, Jesus.

“You must choose this day whom you will serve. Naturally you must. But as for me and my house, I mean to cling to this man Jesus.”

The Sinner

Let's move on to a sinner. Well, we are all sinners. I mean a sinner conscious of sin and troubled by it. After him we will walk with the atheist for a while. First, let us listen to the thoughts of the sinner:

“I was drawn to Jesus as a storm-tossed ship seeks a harbor. I was desperate. Still am. I have sinned. I can hardly lift my eyes to look at my wife and my neighbors. I feel that I no longer belong among respectable folk. I am bedeviled by passions, lust, and greed. I have squandered countless opportunities. I have walked on by the poor without giving even a penny. I have broken my word so many times I could blame no one for distrusting me. I have lost confidence in myself, as if I am in bondage to sin and am fighting a losing battle. I am ashamed of things I have done and of things I have left undone.

“I followed the crowd to Jesus in hope of finding some peace, some chance to hold my head up again. Though I have not been a good man for a long time, still I yearn for righteousness. My heart breaks over the hurt and sorrow I have caused other people. I had hoped that maybe this Jesus could somehow wipe clean the slate for me and let me start again. Only, Jesus seems too upright for the likes of

me. As far as I can tell, he is not troubled by vices and bad habits as I am. He is no lawbreaker. He is no breaker of hearts. Can he understand a sinner like me? I listened to his sermon just now and it seemed both difficult and severe. He speaks of the Bread of Life, but is that Bread meant for *me*? Can it be meant for me, or only for more saintly people?

“Truth is, I feel out of place with this Jesus. I fear that if he really knew me, he would not want me. So, I am walking away. I am sad to be walking away, but I am walking away nonetheless.”

And that is indeed sad, overwhelmingly sad, that any troubled soul on this earth should feel it right to walk away from Jesus, for that fatal charge brought against Jesus by his opponents ultimately is true: Jesus is a friend of sinners! Forgiveness was his constant theme and practice. We hear it in his inaugural sermon, the Sermon on the Mount:

But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also. (Matthew 5:39, KJV)

But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; (Matthew 5:44, KJV)

He taught us to forgive those who sins against us:

And forgive us our sins; for we also forgive every one that is indebted to us. And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil. (Luke 11:4, KJV)

He spoke of forgiveness in his parables:

²⁰And he arose, and came to his father. But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him. ²¹And the son said unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son. ²²But the father said to his servants, Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet: ²³And bring hither the fatted calf, and kill it; and let us eat, and be merry: ²⁴For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found. And they began to be merry. (Luke 15:20-24, KJV)

He urged forgiveness not seven times, but seventy times seven:

²¹Then came Peter to him, and said, Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times? ²²Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven.

(Matthew 18:21-22, KJV)

He forgave the adulterous woman:

⁷So when they continued asking him, he lifted up himself, and said unto them, He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her. ⁸And again he stooped down, and wrote on the ground. ⁹And they which heard it, being convicted by their own conscience, went out one by one, beginning at the eldest, even unto the last: and Jesus was left alone, and the woman standing in the midst. ¹⁰When Jesus had lifted up himself, and saw none but the woman, he said unto her, Woman, where are those thine accusers? hath no man condemned thee? ¹¹She said, No man, Lord. And Jesus said unto her, Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more. (Johne 8:7-11, KJV)

And as he was dying, there were words of forgiveness on his lips:

³⁴Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do. And they parted his raiment, and cast lots. (Luke 23:34, KJV)

No! Let no trembling soul walk away from Jesus in discouragement that his sin is too great, her sin is too great. Lay your sin down at the feet of Jesus. Lay down your burden:

Come now, and let us reason together, saith the LORD: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool. (Isaiah 1:18, KJV)

An Atheist

Now let us walk with the atheist for a ways. I'll tell you in advance that I think that the stance of some atheists is an honorable one. I disagree with them and sorrow for them, but respect them still. Let us walk a ways, then, with a certain kind of atheist.⁴

"My problem with Jesus is that none of this makes any difference," I imagine him saying. "Jesus claims that he comes down from heaven, but I do not believe in heaven, nor in hell, nor in the Father, nor in the Holy Spirit.

"And let me tell you why I do not in Jesus, or his heavenly Father, or the Holy Spirit. It is that even if they *are* real, I turn away from them. There is just too much sadness in the world to believe in God, any god. Look at yon cripple. She

⁴ Naturally there are other kinds of atheists. I think that the case of the one who believes he or she can sufficient account for reality without reference to God should be reserved for another forum, perhaps a seminar in which those who know science better than I do can help teach us.

has dragged her poor body along for fifty years. The stress on her lame leg has been transferred to both hips and to her lower back. She is continually in pain. Life is getting harder and harder for her. And look at that elderly man over there. He was a scholar, now he cannot remember his way home. And look at that poor man who has been poor his whole life. He never knew what it was like to have peace concerning money. He was always worried about his next meal, and now he is old and grey. Meanwhile, look how the wicked man has flourished. He is cruel, yet he is rich and influential. There are earthquakes and mudslides and fierce fires and epidemics and mass starvation.

“No, Jesus might be fine, yet this world goes on as before. I do not oppose Jesus, I just walk away from him.”

So, that is a certain kind of atheist – the kind who is so sick at heart over suffering and wickedness in this world that he can no longer believe in God. It is not simply that he disbelieves in God, he also opposes God if God there should be.

As I said already, I respect such an atheist and have affection for him, for her. In fact, I feel that such a one is not all that far away from the kingdom of God. I could imagine our Lord Jesus looking after him or her sorrowfully but also with hope even as this one walks away. This one puts me in mind of the scribe who gave his testimony about the first and greatest commandment:

³²And the scribe said to him, “You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that he is one, and there is no other but he; ³³and to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength, and to love one’s neighbor as oneself, is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.” ³⁴And when Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.”
(Mark 12:32-34, RSV)

That would be fine praise, at least to me: to think that Jesus himself could approve of my central conviction and judge that I was not far off from the kingdom of God.

Likewise, I imagine Jesus looking with some true affection on the atheist who is so heartsick of this world’s sufferings that he cannot bring himself to believe in God. Such a one seems near to the kingdom. Maybe one day, he will actually surrender to Christ and the faith of the church.

For one thing, the position of this atheist is not that different from that of the plain man in the matter of “what next?” How is the situation of the atheist improved by denying Jesus? Is this world’s suffering decreased thereby? Do hurricanes cease to blow? Do wicked men no longer prosper? Is hope on earth increased by walking away from Jesus?

Well, the atheist is free to answer, “I do not care whether hope is increased by walking away from Jesus or not. I am just saying that I will not participate in deceit. I will not participate in the illusion that Jesus makes any difference to this world”

Okay. Fair enough. The one answer I feel I can suggest to this atheist walking away from Jesus is that his walking away cannot affect one way or the other whether Jesus is what he says: the Bread of Life. If Jesus is risen, it does not matter one way or the other whether the atheist believes it or whether anyone believes it. That is not how the real world goes. You might disbelieve in anyone you want, but they will go on living their merry way any way.

I think that all I can do at this point is to express my conviction that it is good for the atheist that Jesus is risen, because it means that the atheist is in the hands of Jesus and that I am convinced that this is good - scary, but good. That is, I anticipate that the atheist has a blessing in store: a frightening blessing, perhaps, a blessing that the atheist himself does not anticipate, not might even want, but a blessing on the horizon anyway. Yes, and perhaps closer to hand than the atheist anticipates. I only wish the atheist could turn to it sooner. Many rational people have. And in the process, they have made the most of the days left to them.

Ten Thousand Conversations

Well, I am done with these conversations for now. There are ten thousand such conversations we could have. Indeed, there are as many such conversations as there are stars in the sky and grains of sand on the sea. Their number corresponds to the number of souls ever born on this earth. We will never be able to get to them all now. But Jesus can. Jesus will. Many a conversation is ahead of humanity. And I say, let us prepare ourselves for that conversation as best we can, trying to learn of the One to whom we will be giving an account, trying to walk in his ways now, to the benefit of this world and to his glory, along with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.