

August 23, 2009
Lectionary 21b
John 6:56-69
Pr. Craig Mueller

LEAVING THE CHURCH

They say that people are leaving. Leaving our churches in droves. Leaving the so-called mainline denominations. Denominations like the ELCA.

Where are they going, you may ask? An American Religious Identification Survey last year showed that 15 percent belong to the fastest growing religious group in our country, the *nones*, those with no religious preference. 5 percent more said they did not know their religion or refused to answer. That means one out of five Americans belong either to the *nones* or the *don't knows*. That's more than the number of Lutherans, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Methodists, Pentecostals, Mormons, Jews and Muslims combined!

I suspect some of you know some *nones*. The strange thing is, most of these people still believe in God or a higher power. They're just done with organized religion. Many of them can't reconcile the religious beliefs of their childhood with a constantly changing world. Others are done with the scandals and hypocrisy. And plenty of folks believe they can do the spiritual thing on their own—through yoga, meditation, nature, or twelve-step groups. And Sunday mornings have come to mean Starbuck's and the New York Times.

Well, it hasn't been a very quiet week for the Lutherans in Lake Wobegan. And you've probably heard the news! You wonder, though, how the *nones* reacted to the historic news on Friday that our denomination changed its policies on same-gender relationships. Some probably yawned. Perhaps other rolled their eyes, amazed that we've been so obsessed with sex for decades. It sounds like for most of the younger generation it's all a total non-issue. They're probably glad to see the church enter the 21st century.

This congregation is known as place where questioning is honored. A place where we can struggle with ancient texts and their meaning for our contemporary lives. A place that is truly *church*—yet acknowledges the ways that organized religion has been a force for legalism, hurt or exclusion for many. It's not so hard to understand why people have left the church. And then there's the troubling fact that the fastest growing churches are ones that preach a kind of Christianity that is very black and white. Where the answers are clear. Where you don't question. Where you may need to check your mind at the door.

I suspect that Jesus the preacher offended plenty of people in his day. I suspect people resisted change and wanted to keep things the way they always were. They probably didn't want to look anew at some of their long-held beliefs.

Today's gospel follows a long discourse Jesus has given on the bread of life. And Jesus is blowing their minds. The physicality of his words is shocking. Even if it's a metaphor, the talk about eating flesh and drinking blood is too much--to imagine God coming down among them ... taking flesh in Jesus ... losing the distinction between heaven and earth. Many of Jesus' followers said it was just too difficult to grasp. It was too much to wrap their minds around. So they left.

Jesus turns to the remaining twelve and asks, "Are you going to leave too?"

Plenty of gays and lesbians have left the ELCA and other churches over the years because of policies of discrimination. Now folks on the other side of the continuum threaten to leave when the vote has gone the other way. When the path is difficult, or when we don't get our way, or when the hurt is too much, leaving is logical.

For twenty years I have listened to faithful Christians on both sides quote scripture, tell stories, plead for understanding, and try to change minds and hearts. It is exhausting and it takes an emotional toll. Yet I am proud to be in a church that has engaged in a process of moral deliberation, all done with great respect and civility. Roman Catholics and conservative evangelicals must look on with either great horror or envy! After all, we wrestled with scriptural texts that clearly prohibit homosexuality. But for the first time ever, a majority came to realize that the context in those passages is completely different. That they are not at all addressing the realities of committed same-gender relationships that we are dealing with today. The same conclusion reached by our guest biblical scholar Ralph Klein who spoke here in May.

We've been there before. I'm sure the same arguments were made when the ordination of women was first discussed. It's against God's will. It contradicts the bible and two thousand years of tradition. It will harm our ecumenical relationships. It will cause people to leave. Yet nearly forty years later few are questioning that the right decision was made in 1970.

When Jesus asked the disciples whether they were also planning to leave, Peter had his answer ready. *Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.*

Maybe some of you considered leaving the church in recent years. Maybe some of you even took a sabbatical. But many of you decided not to leave. To stick it out. To stay in the community of faith that baptized and nurtured you. The church that proclaimed to you words of grace, words of hope. You chose to stay, to work for change, understanding and reconciliation. For your work, your tears, your persistence I am grateful.

Come to think of it, where would we go? Yes, the church has not always been a place of welcome. Yes, the church can be full of hypocrites. Yes, the church is as broken as any family or other institution. As broken as any and all of us.

But it is in precisely such a community that we hear words of forgiveness, words of mercy, words of life. Words that declare our worth as children of God. Words that set us free. Words that make us one even amid our divisions and disagreements.

Lord, to whom shall we go? Your words give us life. For Lutherans every verse of scripture is not of equal weight. In every situation, in every challenge, in every struggle there is gospel. There is good news. There is mercy. What a gift it is to be part of a reforming movement that seeks to reinterpret our ancient faith for our lives today.

But there's more. This gift comes to us in community. Not just reading the bible in my room or meditating by the lake. Christ comes among us as we assemble to hear words of eternal life and to receive him in food and drink.

In a new and profound way the ELCA has said this week that all are truly welcome. We've been saying that for years. But we are now challenged to respect those who interpret the scriptures faithfully, yet come to different conclusions. Even after such a historic vote was taken on Friday in Minneapolis the reaction was muted. There were tears of deep joy and relief. And there were tears of disbelief, shock and grief. And I'm sure there are very divergent reactions in ELCA churches across the country today. Maybe the Holy Spirit isn't revealed so much in the rightness of the position we hold on controversial issues, but in the ways we honor, respect and forgive those who disagree with us. Who have even hurt us greatly.

Lord, to whom shall we go? We all stand in need of healing. Of forgiveness. Of reconciliation. Today and each Lord's Day we yearn to hear in community words that are music to our ears. Words that are balm to our wounds. Words that are food for our souls. *Your sins are forgiven. Word of God, word of life. The peace of Christ be with you. The body and blood of Christ for you. The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord grant you peace.*

We didn't need to wait for the ELCA to tell us we are welcome in our own church home. But how wonderful it feels. But don't forget the greater truth: God is faithful. God will not leave us. In our doubts and questions. In our divisions and disagreements. In our hurts and tears. In our joy and celebration. In all that we experience as a community of faith. That is the heart of God's baptismal promise: *You are mine forever. I will not leave you.*