

Hillcrest Congregational United Church of Christ
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Ephesians 6:10-20 (page 1020), John 6:56-69 (page 929)
Difficult Words

In John 6: 59 we hear, “[Jesus] said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum. When many of his disciples heard it, they said, “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?” But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, “Does this offend you?” ... For Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe... 66Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. Jesus was teaching things that many people found hard to hear. When they heard his difficult words, many of them turned their backs and no longer followed him. And so it begins, the wheat is separated from the chaff.

But, let us go back a few steps. Let us start by putting ourselves in the context of the time and ministry of Jesus. Close your eyes if you like. Imagine we are all in the marketplace, in the middle of the road in the village, some of us are selling things we have made or harvested, some perhaps buying what we need to make a meal for our family. Or perhaps we are standing by the village well, drawing water for our households, greeting friends, sharing some news.

And then, along comes a group of people into our hearing, some of them are strangers! As they walk along, one of them is teaching, and the others are

listening, following along. Jesus has just come to town, and some of the people are his disciples, others are just curious about the strangers.

What do you imagine, what do you observe? (sights, sounds, smells, touch, taste). Now let us focus on Jesus, what is he doing? What is he like? (charismatic, humble, caring, healing, touching, smiling, talking, listening, aura, interesting/fascinating to listen to).

I imagine that when Jesus first arrived in a new town there was great excitement- strangers! Entertainment at the least, a new teacher, a healer! As the word gets out, people would begin to gather around, want to hear, want to be healed, want to hang out with this group of people who seem to have a sense of hope and possibility about them.

But as time goes on, the excitement and the novelty wear off. As Jesus continues to teach, the things he is saying, the words he is using, become more difficult to hear. Some of the things he says are hard to understand and challenge their thinking. Learning new things is difficult. They don't want to have to think so hard. Some of the people stop listening and go back to their lives.

Some of the things Jesus says conflict with what people have always believed. He is saying that the religious rules that they were taught are not the real rules of God. But, it is much more simple to follow the rules they have always known. Some people continue to come to hear him teach. Others stop coming.

As Jesus and the begin traveling to other towns, some people stay behind. Other people are still so excited about what he is teaching and doing, they leave their homes and become his disciples. As Jesus continues to teach, some of the things he says challenge the way things have always been in their society.

Jesus even says things that challenge the authority of the leaders of the temple, even the rulers of the nation! Ah, now it is starting to get hot- Offensive?! No, what he is teaching is dangerous. It could get you thrown out of the temple, arrested even. People who have been following for a long time begin to leave.

Finally, Jesus begins to teach about eternal life. You know there were people in that time who did not believe in life after death, so they have already left. But, some of the people who are still with him begin to understand that he is talking about eternal life beginning now, not in heaven. Some of them grow disillusioned- eternal life, here? Who is he kidding?! Then, he tells them he has the key, no he is the key and through his death, they will find eternal life. Now, Jesus loses people who even called themselves his disciples.

But Jesus continues to teach using difficult, challenging words. What words of Jesus are challenge you? Which words are difficult for you to hear? Some things he says are difficult to understand because we live in a different time, culture and speak a different language than Jesus and his followers. His parables would have been understandable to many of the people because the stories were about things in their everyday lives that are foreign to us. Yet we know that the

disciples had to ask Jesus to explain many of his parables. Sometimes it is the translation of Jesus' words that make it harder or easier for us to understand or accept. An example is when Nicodemus asks- how can I be born again from my mother's womb? Yet Jesus means, that Nicodemus must be reborn of the spirit.- born from above. What are some of the teachings you find hard to understand?

Which of Jesus' words do you find difficult?

- Sell all you have and give the money to the poor, then come follow me.
- Pray for those who persecute you.
- Come and follow me now. Leave others to bury your father.
- Who are my mother and sisters and brothers? The ones who follow God.
- I have come to bring a sword- families will be divided because of what I tell you- some will follow me, some will not.
- Put down your sword- those who live by the sword die by the sword
- Take up your cross and follow me.
- Turn the other cheek.
- Forgive not seven times seven but seventy times seven.
- Do not come to worship God until you have reconciled with others.
- Love one another as I love you
- Now I call you friends. There is no greater gift than to give your life for a friend.
- Father, forgive them, they know not what they do

Jesus spoke the truth to his disciples. He speaks the truth to us. Sometimes the truth is difficult to understand. Sometimes the words are difficult to hear. In the Gospel of John we hear that when finally only the twelve remained around Jesus, he asked them, "Do you also wish to go away?" Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. 69We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."

The disciples gave up everything, they had nothing to return to. They became totally dependent upon following Jesus and being part of the movement his teaching started. They were totally committed to serving him, believed that he was the Messiah, and that the way he taught was the way for them. They knew that there was no one else who could give them what he had provided- the bread of life.

He even began to teach them that following him meant following him to their deaths. And so they stayed, most of them anyway, for a while anyway. One did betray him, one did deny him, the other ten appeared to deserted him. But then all but that one returned. And in the end, the eleven did follow him to their deaths- all of them died martyred while serving as his disciples. Oooh, now those are difficult words.

So I ask you to consider: Do you also wish to go away? Or will you stay, and follow Jesus all the way? No matter how difficult the words might get? Jesus teaches us in the Gospel of John that he is the bread and blood of life. He is asking if we are willing to make the deepest level of commitment. Bread is a gift of God to sustain life, but blood is life itself. Jesus is asking us to make him - and the One who abides in him - the seat of our life / the centre of our life; belonging to God alone.

If we make God the center of our life, then we will live in eternal life. Then we will not only want, but joyfully engage in living out the Way, the difficult words of Jesus. "Sell all you have, pray for those who persecute you, put down

your sword, turn the other cheek, forgive not seven times seven but seventy times seven, do not come to worship God until you have reconciled with others, love one another as I love you, take up your cross and follow me.”

The words Jesus spoke are spirit and life. But they are difficult words to understand, difficult to hear, difficult to follow, difficult to trust. Trust is like walking into one side of a dark room, knowing there is a light if we can find the switch. Sometimes, even when there is no light in the room- we have to walk through the darkness to get to the light switch on the other side.

Trusting in these words, seeking through out our lives to understand these words, endeavoring to live these difficult words. These words are difficult because they call us to a higher level – to being a better self, to being a better church. Remember that in the case of Jesus and his followers, the group got smaller as the stakes got higher. But in the end, individually and together they made a commitment. Then they banded together to live out those difficult words. The result was something no one could have imagined possible, a following of Jesus that has grown, lasted over two centuries, and spread over the whole world.

In Ephesians 6:10-20 we heard Paul’s motivational charge to the Ephesians. Be strong in God and God’s power, wearing the whole armor of God. Stand firm in truth and righteousness and proclaim the gospel of peace. Take the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the [difficult] word of God. Pray and persevere.

We are a small group now too. And the stakes are high each of us in our lives, for this church, and for the community around us. If we, individually and together, band together to live out those difficult words and pray and persevere... the result can be something none of can now imagine. But God does. Amen.