

21st Sunday
8/25/2024

CHALLENGE AND COMFORT

Has anyone ever said something that challenged you, that you found hard? Has anyone ever called you on something that upset you but that you later realized was true and that what was said actually helped you. If so, you know that's how we grow. Challenges and even hard sayings can propel us forward. Teachers introduce new concepts so their students can grow; coaches share new techniques so their teams can excel and Jesus shares hard and challenging words to lead us into the life of God.

This saying is hard; who can accept it? Jesus has just been talking about the gift of himself, what we call the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. He has just been saying, *My flesh is true food and my blood is true drink*. What we see from this side of the resurrection as a wonderful and glorious gift, was something that some of them couldn't handle and..... they left. We know that Jesus shares with us many hard sayings. Think of:

Love your enemies, Forgive seventy-seven times, Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us, Love your neighbor as yourself, What God has joined, no one must divide, Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect, Pick up your cross and follow me, and that list goes on.

Like a good teacher, like a good coach, like a good parent, Jesus shares these hard and challenging sayings not to hurt us but to help us.

The real question isn't whether these sayings are hard but whether they are true. If they are true, and we believe they are, then it's not a matter of complaining but rather figuring out how we can best live them realizing that they are given for a reason, given to us out of love to help us to love, and lead us into the eternal love of God. Some sayings can be both true but also hard.

But it's not all challenge. Jesus also speaks to us kind and comforting words: *Come to me all you who are weary and I will give you rest, Whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live, Blessed are the peacemakers, I am the Good Shepherd, Your sins are forgiven, As the Father loves me, so I also love you, I am with you always*, and that list also goes on.

We find in Jesus both challenge and comfort and it's important to hold onto both. Without those words of comfort, Jesus can come off as a stern taskmaster and without those words of challenge, we can see Jesus as some sort of a warm fuzzy. Without comfort we grow despondent, without challenge we grow complacent.

Do you also want to leave? Do you want to leave because you find it hard and challenging? Make no mistake, God's grace coming into our lives can sometimes be uncomfortable. Jesus' words will challenge you and if sometimes they don't, you can ask yourself if you have really listened. It calls us to change our ways, even to repent, to turn around. Again, it's not a question of whether these sayings are hard but whether they are true.

We can leave Jesus because we don't like his words, because of the behavior of some of his followers or because of the behavior of some of his ministers. We can leave Jesus when we turn away not only from his word but his presence in the sacraments, in prayer, in the events of daily life and in the stranger, the poor, the sick, the unborn and those in need.

When we feel tempted to leave, we have a good example in Peter and his response. Now Peter personally knew both the challenge and comfort of Jesus but it was at times, a rough ride. *Master, to whom shall we go.* One author says, it's after Peter is saying, *Lord, I don't understand everything you are saying and I don't even like some of what I understand but I'm not going anywhere.* –Why is that? *You have the words of eternal life.* Peter has the gift of perseverance.

Eternal life isn't just in the hereafter. Eternal life begins with this life and continues into the next where it reaches perfection. Among his comforting words Jesus tells us, *I have come that they might have life and have it more abundantly.*

With lives of intentional faith, informed by the word of God, nourished by the Eucharist and encouraged by one another, may we persevere in following Jesus. Both his words of comfort and of challenge have the same goal, to lead us into the love of God, into eternal life. Like Peter, even when we don't understand everything Jesus says, even when we don't like what we do understand, may we respond with Peter, *To whom shall we go. You have the words of eternal life* and may we add, *Lord, I'm not going anywhere.*