My brothers and sisters in Christ, let us pray. Lord of our Hearts, Minds, Souls, and Spirits, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts always be acceptable in Your sight, our strength and our Redeemer, Amen.

We’re in the homestretch of our series in John on the meaning of Jesus’ statements about what it means when Jesus says he is the “bread of life”. What are some of the images that we talked about and that you remember from the last couple of sermons/scriptures? (take all answers).

OK, not bad. We’re listening and learning, right? The point of coming to Church is for worship, yes, and praying, sure, but also for learning and reinforcement of the ways in which we love and serve God. And it doesn’t matter what house of faith we walk into; that expectation is the same whether Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Bhuddist. We are here to worship, or praise; pray, or center ourselves; and learn. What do we expect in sermons and learnings? Do we expect to hear those things that already match our opinions and conclusions, what is called confirmation bias? Or do we want new stuff that shakes our lives up?

Well, in this small village of Capernaum where Jesus was teaching, where he healed Jairus’ daughter, where he’s been invited to live after being thrown our of Nazareth, he doesn’t give them a comfortable time of it. He says something that borders on sacrilege. He says, “I am the bread of life”. Now imagine how that sounds. It might sound like this: Here we are in a little village of Greenland, enjoying the teachings and worship, and suddenly I say to you, ‘I am the bread of life; if you believe in me you’ll never go hungry or thirsty; and I have come down from heaven do do God’s will’.

You all would think I was out of my mind. You might even grumble about how this can’t be, that I’m just an ordinary average guy, as the old Joe Walsh song goes. And then I go on to tell you that you have to eat my flesh and drink my blood, so that we can be together as one always.

What would we think about that? (take all answers).

This goes against all sensibilities. We’d argue about this for sure; and even those folks who really liked me would say, “well, Pastor Mark, this is just all too much. I’m not sure I can do this anymore”. You’d walk out.

That is exactly what has happened in this description of events the last 4 weeks. Jesus has just said that following Moses’ law isn’t enough to fully understand God. Yet that’s exactly what many centuries and generations of Jewish law and scripture have said—faith in Jewish tradition of the time was measured by following what Moses handed down and the scribes and Pharisees interpreted around those things. It had to do with actual behaviors and scenarios of conduct, and when a new one came up, then they wrote rules for that one, too.

Jesus has already said he is the fulfillment of the law to Nicodemus, but now he’s teaching it in his new town. It’s all too much; this just can’t be; Jesus is a good teacher, but he’s Mary and Joseph’s son, and we know them. Jesus was not sent down from heaven, he was born, we watched him grow up. And now he expects us to believe that, unless we come to God through his teachings, healings, words, and acts, unless we become his disciples and ultimately apostles, we don’t know God. And many, many disciples Jesus gathered asked “where shall I go, what shall I do?” And the scripture says that they left. They could not wrap their hearts around this teaching.

Jesus uses this imagery of bread and flesh, wine and blood, to give us the metaphorical language that we can’t live without him, or indeed, outside of him. That’s why last week he used the word, “Abide”. And I have to say I’m grateful for the communion symbolism and sacrament we practice, because if it were just this series of teachings and commandments I don’t know if I would have enough commitment to maintain my faith in God. God would be a head thing, not a heart thing, still a series of rules and frameworks to follow. And I need more than that.

God is Spirit; we know that from the earliest verses of Genesis. And we know that Spirit could have chosen a thousand different ways to better get us to know God. But God chose to come to us as one of us. To experience all the pains and pangs of the flesh. Disappointment, hope, joy, pain, desire, love, grief, anger, excitement, gratitude, mercy, compassion, betrayal, abandonment, and death. If God didn’t know these things that I feel too, It would not have the same hold on me. That’s what Jesus is saying in his statements on the Bread of Life and the Living Water. God knows us. God wants us to know that, but also feel it richly, deeply, longingly, passionately. But it’s a hard sell.

Because even Scarlett O’Hara, in wondering her next moves in all the uncertainty in asking “where shall I go, what shall I do?”, would not surrender her independence. We all believe that the good things that happen to us is because of the merit of our accomplishments in navigating the levers of this world. That allows us to keep God at a distance. Because if we let the Divine in too close to our souls, and actually admitted to our fears of failure, losing control, or being un-loved, we might need to depend on God for our well-being beyond what WE think is important.

If we let God too close to our souls, we might actually have to re-prioritize our lives in every way. This teaching is too hard, say Jesus’ many disciples. And our scripture says that many of them turned back and no longer followed him.

I’ll leave you with these final thoughts.

Jesus had fed 5,000. Healed many. Walked on water. They followed him to Capernaum as long as Jesus was at a distance, not asking anything of them, not making any kind of sacrifices that would impact their lives.

But once things got tough—once Jesus said that God is wanting to fulfill lives of love, but tough love that means it’s not just following teachings but abiding in God at every moment—then when things get tough, we, and they, left. They were unwilling to do what it takes to know, serve, and love God fully.

Only the Twelve remained, and Jesus said, “what about you? Are you going to leave me also?”

And Peter’s response is not the one we look for in the storybook ending. But it’s an honest answer, and maybe the only one we are capable of giving when our lives are too tough to bear and we’re up against it. Peter says Lord, we have followed you this far, and if not you, to whom shall we turn? We have heard, and we will believe.

And so they stay. They know that there have been glimpses of the Kingdom of Heaven. They just can’t see it right now, but they know that it’s there, if they stick with it. “We believe, and know that you are the Holy One of God”. And for most days, is that good enough for us, too? The question is ours for this week and each week. Thanks be to God, Amen.