

A Storytelling Commentary on John 6:56-69

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The bread discourse ends with Jesus' words to his disciples who were offended. They are so offended that some of them actually leave. In all probability this reflects the reality of the storytelling situation when John recited the Gospel. People would have been listening to these discourses now for over an hour and it is quite likely that some of them were tempted to leave. John builds that into the story: some were interested and stuck around to follow Jesus, and others who were initially interested left after awhile. It's a very real possibility, especially with these provocative words, that some people in John's audience left and that this is a dimension of what is being described in this discourse. Jesus as a storyteller responds to and reacts to all those who are still staying and saying, "Do you too want to get up and leave? If so, go! The only ones who can fully participate in this are those whom the Father has called, so if you need to go, then go."

The focus of his interpretation of his provocative words is the Spirit. The Spirit gives life, but the flesh is useless. This makes essential a spiritual interpretation of Jesus' words about "eating my flesh and drinking my blood." All of this is about spiritual life. Another dimension of what is going on is the discernment of those who will believe. The audience is invited to examine their own response to Jesus and to discern whether or not they are among those who have been chosen by the Father to believe, or whether they are drawn to step away. Jesus knew. His foreknowledge is one of the gifts that Jesus has. It happens a number of times in the stories. This is different than pre-determination. It is what Calvin was trying to describe in the doctrine of predestination, that is, of God's knowing ahead of time the destiny or purpose of each person's life. God has not determined what will actually work out.

The energy of the Spirit is what draws those who believe. This is an invitation to listener inquiry, of engagement with the audience who are asking the very questions that Peter and the other disciples are raising here. The reality of storytelling is probably that many left and the question is, "Do you, too, want to leave?" The audience is invited to identify with the disciples and specifically with Simon Peter whose response is "Lord, to whom do we go? You have the words of eternal life." So they want to stick around both to hear Jesus' words but also to be part of the community. The audience is invited to identify with the disciples in that response.

Another dimension of this discernment is the recognition that there are those who will betray Jesus—out of hatred, out of anger, out of frustration at the failure of Jesus to fulfill the expectations of the people. The possibility of becoming a betrayer is named. Judas Iscariot, one of the twelve, is identified as the one who will betray him. This is another dimension of listener discernment. Listeners can then ask themselves, "How do I feel about this man? Am I tempted to betray him, or do I follow him and continue to listen to what he is saying and move toward the possibility of being one of his disciples?"