

**13 Pentecost
August 22, 2021**

**In the name of God, who in Jesus,
taught us the meaning of unconditional Love.
AMEN**

Oh, it is so good to be here with you today. I certainly know that each of us is having to deal with the news we all have heard about the changes going on in the Covid pandemic. I care very much how this impacts each of you! Honestly, I think the best you and I can do is to kinda' go back to the beginning and wear our masks, wash our hands, keep our social distancing and be vaccinated. I KNOW it all feels strange and unnatural – but you and I can convert this reality into a special time for us to just be quiet with God. Each of us has much more alone time (whether we want it or not). Let's use it to be with God -to be still and listen in our very beings for that Blessed Assurance of God's everlasting love.

With that in mind – let's consider our Holy Scripture for today. In this morning's Gospel we see how Jesus is trying to tell it like it is...and his wider audience...his extended family of followers is dropping like flies. They are saying "Whoa...this is too hard. This is not what I expected."

But, Jesus did not change his message ... his clear, but very tough message. Think of the many tough things he said... that in order to be first, you must be last...you must be willing to serve...that you must give away LOTS of what you have...that you cannot serve two masters...money & God...that a marriage vow means no cheating...that you only kid YOURSELF if you weasel out of giving back to God at least ten per cent of all that you have. /// And so we hear, according to the Gospel today, that Jesus' followers began to fall away...they didn't want to hear his hard demands.

For me, I think there is a very human weariness in Jesus at this point, a hint of frustration at the inability of even those near to him to understand. We read: "The words that I have spoken to you are Spirit and Life! But among you, there are some who do not believe." And then in the next sentence a shadow is cast over the community. The Gospel said: "For Jesus knew from the first,, who were the ones that did not believe, and who was the one that would betray him." Suddenly we realize that our usual image of this seemingly close community, totally committed to their leader and hanging on every word, may not be quite accurate. In fact, I wonder -- were there degrees of commitment – or not, even in this inner circle. If so, the infinite variety of belief and commitment in any Christian community today is not a regrettable retreat from an original perfect unity. It is merely the way things have always been. We read: "Because of these hard sayings, many of his disciples turned back" and so do many still, /// perhaps searching for some more congenial teaching and worship. So, Jesus looks at his closest friends...his Chosen Disciples, and with a heavy heart, says to THEM: "Will YOU also go? Are you going to leave me?"

And then it feels like...well, at least to me, /// that there is a pause. After Jesus asks "Are YOU also going to leave me?" /// No one can speak. /// Finally, Peter says, /// "Lord, where would we go? You have the words of eternal life. /// We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God." /// Every faltering step, every hard-won mile of our own spiritual journey, leads us to

the point where we can echo these words of St. Peter: We can say: Lord – where would we go? For me - I think this is among the most poignant moments in the story of our Lord on this earth. /// The disciples looked at him...like we do...with various dimensions of trust, of hope, and faith. And Jesus did just what he does with us. He kept talking about the kingdom of God/ about grace and mercy/ about his presence with them always/ about turning the other cheek/ about the last being first/ about the vital importance of forgiveness /// and many just couldn't stand it! They didn't want to hear it. They did not want a religion that demands such self-LESS-ness. /// So ... many walked away. Many had witnessed his miracles, or had heard of them, and they had thought that somehow he would fulfill their needs as they understood them to be. Add this to the problem of accepting what he had just said about being the true bread of life. No wonder many just found all of this too much to deal with...so they walked away. Now, keep in mind that these were people who up to that point had already chosen to be his followers, but when push came to shove and Jesus made statements they could not accept, that were just too hard for them, we read that some bowed out. That this man from Nazareth should make such claims that he is the life-giving bread of life sent down from heaven, that he and the Father are one...well, it was just too much to accept, indeed to trust. As much as they may have once been impressed by him, witnessed his miracles and were touched by his teachings, once he called upon them to take that extra step of faith...they rebelled. ///

Note that Jesus made no effort to change what he said, to equivocate his words. Even knowing how much pain it might cause him and the risk he was taking. /// He turned to his twelve chosen disciples and said ... "Will *you* also leave me?" It would have been easy for him to say, as we do so often, "Wait a minute. You misunderstood what I said." No. /// That was not Jesus' way. Then or now. We are free to accept or reject. What love on Jesus' part! What pain for him - as they, and we, so often, make the wrong choice. Yet Jesus took the risk that he might even be left alone, totally abandoned by his followers, a long time before his abandonment on the Cross. Yet, through everything, their conflicts and doubts, their fears and ambivalence, he promised to be with them forever. ///

Finally, Peter responded with that SOULFUL statement. "Lord, to whom shall we go? WHERE would we go?" Peter realized all that they would lose if they turned from Jesus Christ. Who could give them the assurance of eternal life? That time, for those followers of Jesus was not easy. We know that from reading the Bible. But what God continues to ask of his followers, then, and now, is love, and faith, through the sometime dark times, and certainly now, the darkness that is part of our lives.

I think the story of the followers of Jesus falling away from following him is utterly relevant to us today. We know that many people claim to be Christian. Why they wouldn't be anything else!, Many have professed to be Christ's followers, but once the requirements of faith in Him, real faith, begin to sink in, they make excuses and essentially walk away. – Hear today's Gospel message, "They fell away." They might call themselves Christians, and come to worship on occasion, and even receive communion. And yet, in their hearts, they have walked away. They may indeed profess their faith, but betray it in their hearts, in their daily lives. Actually, in effect they pick and choose. They accept what they want to, and make excuses or justifications about the rest. They

simply will not accept what Jesus says is essential to be a true follower of Christ, /// and therefore, to know the peace that passes all understanding!

It is not enough to profess with our lips that we have faith. It is a response that we must renew day by day. /// It may seem nearly impossible to hold on in the face of our own weaknesses and the world's strong pull away from belief in anything that cannot be seen, touched, or measured. Many do not walk with the Lord /// because the demands of Love and the response of Faith are just too much. BUT then...Where do they go? To whom do they go? Technology, commercialism, financial gain, personal feeling good, becomes their very lives, the golden calf that can so easily draw people away from even thinking about God and God's ways of love and faith and selflessness AND quiet assurance.

LORD, to whom shall WE go? No one else, nothing else makes sense in the light of eternity. There is no promise, no power, no message as lasting, as loving, giving us the opportunity to respond to the giver of all life and love.

There are many who do not believe, or whose faith wavers when darkness hits. /// Certainly right now we are living a life with more questions than answers...and certainly with significant times of darkness....and too often those times seem to knock us off our pins. As followers of Jesus Christ we are given the choice of accepting the gift of faith /// or being indifferent...indeed walking away. Are we lukewarm in our response to his command about loving our neighbor? Do we value the things of the spirit more than those of the flesh? /// We all know that sometimes faith is not easy! The challenge to give up on faith is right there for us when the dark times hit. But, I pray that during these times of darkness, and doubt, we remember that our Lord Jesus HAS NOT GIVEN UP ON US. //As we heard in the words of Paul this morning, written to the young church in Ephesus: Let US put on the whole armor of God. And May we, in the worst of times, join with Peter in saying, "Lord, to whom shall we go? YOU have the words of eternal life!"

AMEN