

## Turning Points

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*John 6:56-69*

There are many ways by which you and I can examine our lives and take stock of where we have been, where we are today, and where we might be in the future. One way to do that is to think about our turning points—those events or decisions, some dramatic, others seemingly inconsequential at the time--that change the course of our lives and determine who we are today. A college summer job that I took at the last minute, a sentence that jumped out at me from a piece of junk mail, a conversation at coffee hour after church—none of these seemed particularly important at the time, but looking back years later I see these as important turning points in my life. Other turning points have been immediately apparent. The sudden death of my sister nearly forty years ago was one of those.

Turning points. Sometimes we know, in the moment, that we have reached one. At others, we see them only in retrospect. We all have them. Think for a moment or two: what have been the turning points in your life?

The 6<sup>th</sup> chapter of John is all about turning points. The longest chapter in John's gospel, it begins with the feeding of the 5,000 and ends with the poignant story that we hear today, a story in which the crowd of disciples who have been following Jesus around Judea and Galilee decide whether to stay with him or turn away. Most of them turn away.

They turn away because Jesus reveals who he really is. At the very beginning of his ministry Andrew and others identify Jesus as the Messiah. As his fame spreads, the expectation grows that Jesus is the hoped-for Messiah who will be king—claiming earthly power and overturning the political order. But Jesus is not this kind of Messiah. John tells us that after the feeding of the 5,000, "*when Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself*" (Jn 6:15). When some of his disciples realize he is not on earth to be their political leader, their earthly king, they turn away.

Others are following Jesus because of his spectacular deeds. Who wouldn't follow a miracle-worker? As word spreads about the changing of water to wine at Cana, the healing of the lame man by the pool, and the feeding of the multitudes from five loaves and two fish, crowds of disciples follow Jesus, wanting to see what he will do next. But Jesus tells them that it is not what he *does*, but who he *is*, that's the point. "*I am the bread of life,*" Jesus says, "*whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty*" (6:35).

When his disciples don't seem to get it, he gets more explicit: "*Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them*" (6:56). Hearing this, many of the disciples are offended. What is this, cannibalism? What on earth is Jesus talking about? Jesus is telling the disciples that those who come to him and believe in him will find new life born of flesh and spirit. This new life is not just about Jesus transforming the world of politics. And it is not just about Jesus transforming the natural order by changing water into wine and healing the sick. This new life is about transforming *them!* It's about each of them responding to God's graceful initiative by opening themselves to a total

transformation in which they die to themselves and are born anew in Christ. It's about turning the control of their lives over to God.

This is not at all what many of those who had been following Jesus had bargained for! So, John says, they "*turned back and no longer went about with him*" (6:66). There follows one of the most poignant questions in Scripture. Turning to the twelve disciples who remain behind while throngs of former disciples go off into the distance, Jesus asks, "*Do you also wish to go away?*" (6:67). With this question, Jesus places his disciples at a turning point.

"Do you also wish to go away?" I don't know about you, but sometimes I *do* wish to go away. I don't like to admit it, but there are times that I deliberately close my eyes to what I don't want to see in the world around me. There are times that I close my ears to voices that I don't want to hear. I want to do that, today, when I see and hear what is happening in Afghanistan. There are times that I want to close off my heart and not care anymore. Sometimes, I do wish to go away<sup>1</sup>.

But I must not do that. What so offended the would-be disciples who turned away from Jesus was the notion that "*those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.*" Our 21<sup>st</sup>-century ears may hear those words more easily because we can place them within the context of Holy Communion, but Jesus is saying something more. In John's gospel, in particular, Jesus is "*the Word made flesh*" (Jn 1:14), the incarnation, the indwelling of God within a human being. Jesus is telling us to live incarnationally, to view our lives as a unity of flesh and spirit. When we live incarnationally, we see our deep interconnection with the Creator and all creation, and we acknowledge our dependence upon one another. To live in Christ is to live as if our lives depend on that interconnection.

Jesus asks those who remain with him, "*Do you also wish to go away?*" Simon Peter answers him, "*Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God*" (6:68-69). This interchange between Jesus and Peter, between divine initiative and human response, is the call and response of discipleship. We choose constantly who it is that we will follow. I have, written on an index card on my refrigerator, a question the theologian Bonnie Thurston raised at a conference I attended a few years ago: "To whom, and to what, will you listen?" In every moment lies the potential for the significant, for momentary decisions and reactions to become turning points toward transformation. Our lives as disciples of Jesus Christ are defined by a series of such turning points.

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<sup>1</sup> John Ortberg, *Christian Century*, 8/9/2003, 17.

One of my seminary professors told a story that began more than forty years ago when he was a first-year student at Yale Divinity School. Larry<sup>2</sup> and his wife were playing tennis, and Larry was a lousy tennis player. While he managed occasionally to hit the ball over the net, he also hit a couple over the fence. When yet another ball went over the fence, Larry thought about just leaving it there, because it had gone quite a distance. But maybe because on a student budget money was tight and a tennis ball had some value, he decided to go find it. The ball had rolled down the hill into the woods, and when Larry got to the bottom of the hill he found the tennis ball sitting next to a young man who was lying face down, unconscious, in a pool of blood. When Larry didn't return to the tennis court his wife came to find him, and then solicited the help of some fellow seminarians. The five of them took the unconscious teenager to the hospital, where his life was saved.

The young man had come to New Haven to find his girlfriend who had run away from home. He found her in a psychiatric unit, where she had been diagnosed with severe mental illness. Despondent, the young man wandered through the streets of New Haven, where he had been mugged and left for dead.

The five seminarians decided to do something about the situation in New Haven, where many people lived in desperate circumstances alongside an elite university and the successful and affluent people who are drawn to such a place. They decided to open a soup kitchen. The Salvation Army offered a room in the basement, but that seemed too dreary a place for the welcoming hospitality the seminarians envisioned. So they invited the rector of Christ Episcopal Church, a prominent church located near the Yale campus, to dinner, and asked if they could run the soup kitchen in the parish hall. The rector said yes, and the Community Soup Kitchen started serving lunch five days a week. Larry's wife quit her job to serve as coordinator of the program. A large pool of volunteers stepped up, and the program became successful beyond their wildest imagination. It went that way for five months, and then it started to get cold outside.

As the weather turned colder, the people served in the soup kitchen would go into the church to stay warm. Well, these folks lived on the streets, and their personal habits of hygiene didn't quite fit the standards of the parishioners of Christ Episcopal Church. So one day the Senior Warden (the head layperson of the church) told the volunteers that the soup kitchen was no longer welcome there. They would have to find somewhere else to go.

Devastated by this stunning and discouraging news, the volunteers decided to host a dinner, and invited the Vestry of Christ Episcopal Church to share a meal with the folks who ate at the lunch program. The people of the Vestry, the lay leaders of the church, were distinguished businessmen (yes, in those days, all men) who arrived impeccably dressed after a day at the office for this dinner with street people in the parish hall.

The next Sunday, the Senior Warden came forward to make an announcement during worship. "It would be hypocritical," he said, "for us to claim that we serve Christ's body at the communion table of the church while ignoring the brokenness of Christ's body in this city. The soup kitchen is staying."

When Larry and his wife returned to New Haven thirty years later, the Community Soup Kitchen was still going strong, serving lunch five days a week. It's still

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<sup>2</sup> Larry Welborn, Professor at Fordham University and Visiting Professor, Methodist Theological School in Ohio.

serving lunch today. On the wall of the dining room where the meal is served is a mural depicting the homeless people and the Vestry members seated at the dinner table on that evening so many years before. It stands as a modern-day version of a long-ago meal in an Upper Room, lived out among the people of New Haven. The mural is so realistic that Larry can still remember the names and stories of the people at the table.

A tennis ball over the fence. An invitation to dinner. A question from Jesus.  
Turning points.

Amen.