

There's a scene in the movie *Forrest Gump* where Tom Hank's character decides to start running. Down the block, through the city, and across the state he runs. He keeps running till he hits an ocean, then turns and runs until he hits the other one. People assume he's running for a cause. So many people are compelled for reasons they can't explain to stay with him. Finally he suddenly stops. People prepare for some big announcement. *"I'm pretty tired; I think I'll go home now."* And that was it. Those that stayed with him saw him differently now. He wasn't running for a cause, at least not what they thought. No more running, so they were going home.

Jesus isn't Forrest Gump, that's for sure. For three years Jesus crisscrossed the countryside, but for a reason. Many people stayed with him too. They followed and learned. Jesus did things that gave them great joy and created hope for their future. Then everything changed for some of them.

I look out and see a group of people who claim to be followers of Jesus. But in the last few weeks Jesus' statements have bumped up against our reason. Our reason struggles to make sense of them. The gospel read for today presents how the 1st century followers of Jesus responded. Some went away. Now Jesus turns to you and asks...

Staying or going
Staying because of the Holy Spirit
Staying because only Jesus has what we need

The gospel of John chapter six records at least four times people struggling with a statement of Jesus. First Jesus told them to believe in the one God sent. They demanded a sign to prove it. He told them the bread of God is the one who came down from heaven. They demanded he give them this bread. He identified himself as that bread. They grumbled thinking he was crazy. It wasn't that they couldn't understand his words. Finally they said, **"This is hard teaching. Who can accept it?"** Jesus had just said that they must eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood to have life.

Jesus knew they were struggling with that. The thought of eating and drinking Jesus sounded violent to them. **"Does this offend you?"** Jesus saw this had the potential to cause them to leave, something he didn't want. But there was more, **"What if you see the Son of Man ascend to where he was before!"** If Jesus were only human that would be hard to accept. He couldn't back up his claims then. But if he was the Son of Man his ascension, his crucifixion, yes even the very eating and drinking shouldn't offend them. It would prove he was truly God in the flesh.

Stories of cannibalism are revolting. It makes us shudder in disgust. So when we hear John chapter six we might do a double take. Did Jesus say eat his flesh and drink his blood? That's disgusting. Those aren't the only words that challenge us. Jesus said don't murder. Easy enough. Hold on, he also said don't hate. But isn't hatred a natural reaction. If someone wrongs me it would be unnatural not to hate. Or forgive for that matter. Wait, Jesus doesn't want me to count the number of times I forgive. That sounds like people could walk all over me. I won't do that. Are Jesus' words hard to accept?

Why do you stay if the concepts are difficult? It's not because things have clicked or suddenly we're able to piece it all together so it made sense. Listen again, with your spiritual ears. **"The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life."** We stay because of the Holy Spirit. We stay because the words Jesus shared are the source of staying power. Eating his body literally won't save; believing in his body will. Hating is a sin we do, forgiving is something Jesus does. The power to believe this comes from the very same words of Jesus. The Holy Spirit uses those words to convince us that when we doubt, when we hate, and when we lack forgiveness Jesus forgives. The Holy Spirit keeps us staying close to Christ by faith.

Some didn't believe then, and some don't believe now. People voluntarily walk away from Jesus thinking it's too crazy or simply too hard to accept what Jesus says as truth. It's sad, but true. But it's not too late to get them back. Jesus wants all to be saved. Every person is one for whom Christ died. Someone you know might be someone who needs to hear that Jesus loves them. Someone who needs to know Jesus is begging for them not to leave, but rather to stay. Stay, so the Holy Spirit can do his work of connecting them to God by faith in Christ.

Stay or go? That decision confronts us all the time. Stay at work or go attend the baseball game? Stay in school or get a job? Stay at home or go out and party? Stay with Jesus or go because he challenges my comforts too much? It seems like every other decision we make, but it's not. Sinners can only go away from Jesus. The Holy Spirit works in us the desire and ability to stay; that's faith. Faith opens our eyes to what Jesus offers. Faith sees his promises, strength, and hope. Faith realizes we need to stay; only Jesus has what we need.

Some went back to families and lifestyle. Some returned to old jobs and friends. They returned to what was comfortable, what made sense, what could be understood. **"From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him."** Whatever they turned back to it was away from God. It was impossible for them to believe that only God the Father could draw people to Jesus. They couldn't understand their lack of choice. Everyone has a choice. They were independent free thinkers. They made their own decisions. And they did, some went away.

Jesus didn't think the twelve would go, but he wanted to hear it from them. **"You do not want to leave too, do you?"** Peter spoke for them all. *"It seems foolish to go. You have what we need. We've seen the miracles and heard the words of eternal life. No, we're not going anywhere."* The Holy Spirit drove the faith in Peter's heart to a beautiful confession. Peter and the other disciples recognized by faith that the promises Jesus made, the perfect life he lived, and the words he spoke were for them. Jesus had what they needed.

Can you remember a time when you weren't a Christian? By God's grace some of you can't. But others of you do remember a time you didn't go to church, when you weren't baptized, or when Bibles didn't always rest on the night stand. No one talked about Jesus. Maybe you were trying to save yourself by your own good works. Maybe you were waiting to finally make your decision for Christ on your own. Or maybe you didn't care at all. Who needed confusing religion or Jesus? Maybe you have these very thoughts now. Christianity's teachings seem hard, almost too much to accept? Maybe you think Jesus doesn't have anything more to offer you. You're going off to some other religion, some other pursuit, or some other way to be saved.

Jesus labors faithfully, patiently, and long so that you will see he does have things to offer. His cross invites you to heavenly blessings you haven't even seen yet. His Word faithfully provides protection from enemies you don't know about. His gospel call brings people into your life at just the right moment to let you know he cares. No other religion or pursuit offers what Christ offers by the gospel. There's no other way to be saved. Stay with Jesus, believe in him. Believe his promises of free and faithful love. Believe so you can share the words of eternal life. Believe Jesus alone has what you need.

Every game has its crunch time. Every offer has its moment when you have to decide. Every invitation has its question, staying or going. Its crunch time with Jesus, staying or going? Time to assess how you're connected to Christ. Is it my own reasoning? Do I really get things from Jesus I can't get anywhere else? Deep in your hearts the Holy Spirit is working a response. Christ's cross, his tomb, the forgiveness he won is all flowing back into your mind. Let Peter's response serve as your response. **"Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life."** The Holy Spirit has our faith right where we want to be. We're staying.