

“Do You Wish to Go Away?”  
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III  
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana  
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**John 6: 56-69**

Do you know what it's like for a smell or a sight or a sound to bring all sorts of memories of the past flooding back into your mind?

Debbie and I spent the summer of 1996 working as chaplaincy interns at Methodist Hospital here in Indianapolis. I spent ten weeks that summer walking the halls of the hospital, learning where this hallway led and that hallway led, and getting lost on several occasions. I noticed how certain floors had certain smells, and how those aromas were associated in my mind with certain memories or experiences.

Seven years later, we moved to Indianapolis to begin sharing in ministry with you here. I don't remember who it was from the congregation that I visited that first time, but I went back to Methodist within the first two months we arrived. And I can tell you without any hesitation, that when I walked in that hospital, even though it had been seven years, all my memories from 1996 flooded back. Why? Because of the smells. It was eerie, but those smells triggered in my mind the visits I had made, the on-call times I had there, and the good and bad memories from a very intense 10 weeks of being a chaplaincy intern.

Sometimes smells and sights and sounds also remind us of places where we feel safe, secure, “at home.” It might be the smell of a favorite dish your mother made growing up, and you yearn for the family dining room set before you. It might be watching children riding their bicycles in your neighborhood, and you remember summer afternoons with your friends. It might be hearing a song on the radio, and you are transported back to that special road trip you and your friends took in high school. When we experience those flashbacks, we yearn for a time we felt less-stressed or less-anxious than we do now, when safety and security surrounded us.

In our passage, today, Amy Howe writes: *Jesus is inviting the disciples to be at home in him, just as he is at home in God. College students miss the smell of their closets and yearn for home. The elderly in nursing homes miss the sight of their collectables gathering dust on the shelf and yearn for home. Soldiers in Iraq miss the quiet of a lazy afternoon uninterrupted by gunfire and yearn for home. Out in the world we must fend for ourselves in an often hostile environment. Whether we are college students coping with a new adult identity or soldiers facing the brutality of war, the world is a place where fear often reigns. Home is the promise of safety, of security; a place where fear does not have the upper hand.*

*Jesus uses familiar symbols of bread, wine, flesh, blood, and water to teach about the gift of life, eternal life – not immortality, but a way of living that deprives fear of having the upper hand.*

For the last two weeks, we have seen how Jesus spoke of himself as God Incarnate, in language which might shock us at first, but in the end elicit words of

hope, life, and promise. In vivid, figurative language, Jesus shares himself as the bread of eternal life, and whenever we eat his flesh and drink his blood we are nourished with his life-giving gift.

Now, in response to what he has said, we hear how his disciples respond. Howe continues:

*The disciples have now been offered this great gift. They have yearned for home, and they are at the doorstep. Surely they will embrace Jesus and walk through the door. But no, many of the disciples complain that the teaching is too difficult (v.60). Jesus asks them if he offends them (v.61). He reminds them that the spirit gives life and his words “are spirit and life” (v.63). And yet there are many who will not believe, many who refuse the safety, the security of home. The very thing they have yearned for is being offered them, and still they turn away from the gift*

(Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 3, Westminster/John Knox Press, © 2009: 382).

What is most startling about this passage – for me, at least – is this simple fact: the hard message which Jesus had just delivered did not just drive people away, but drove *disciples* away. It’s right there in verse 66: “Because of this many of (Jesus’) disciples turned back and no longer went about with him.” This message of home and comfort and abiding in God drove away those who had been following Jesus, who had been not only listeners and who were amazed by his miracles and teaching, but had considered themselves part of the fellowship, dare I say – part of the church.

Funny – people have been driven away from church not just in modern times, but from its very beginning, starting with the one whom the church calls its Lord and Savior. And Jesus didn’t stop what he was doing, run, and beg these disciples to come back into the fold. He didn’t try to make everyone feel good, or cower to people’s emotional outbursts of disgust as they walked away. He simply turned to the original twelve disciples and asked them, “Do you also wish to go away?”

Discipleship is not about getting our way and always feeling good and happy. Discipleship is hard. Discipleship will challenge you and stretch you in ways you didn’t know you could be stretched. Discipleship is not about having all of our needs met by checking in twice a month for worship. Discipleship is about being accountable to God and to one another. Discipleship is about serving every day we are given the gift of life. Discipleship is not easy – but it is fulfilling, and rewarding, and is full of spirit and life.

I think Jesus didn’t want to be weighed down by those who couldn’t accept what we had to say fully, and was giving the twelve their opportunity now, here in chapter six, to, as we like to say, “fish or cut bait.” It’s also interesting that this is the first time in John’s Gospel that refers to “the twelve disciples,” a milestone of sorts that after this test of discourse and others falling away, they are the ones who decide to stay with “the Holy One of God.”

Wallace Bubar is pastor of Overbrook Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, and he writes: *Honestly, it’s a wonder Jesus had any followers left. Maybe the real miracle in the sixth chapter of John wasn’t that 5000 people were fed at the beginning, but that a dozen were still left at the end.*

*When Jesus saw the crowds deserting him, he asked the twelve if they too wished to go away. He understood that following him was no picnic and that they might want to opt out like everyone else. But that's when Peter spoke up: "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life."*

*I've always detected in Peter's words a little hint of exasperation, almost as if he were shrugging his shoulders, throwing his arms up in the air and exclaiming something like: "Look, we don't understand you either, Jesus. We don't get you any better than any of the others did. But what other choice do we have? Where else can we go?"*

*His is a declaration of faith in an ambiguous world like ours and for people like us, who don't understand everything about Jesus and have plenty of unanswered questions, but keep hanging in there with him anyway. There are other options for pursuing spiritual enlightenment, to be sure. Yet we keep coming back to Jesus, maybe because in his words – however perplexing – we've heard something that rings true. Maybe it's because whenever we're in his presence – however mysterious – we feel more alive than we do elsewhere. Something about Jesus keeps bringing us back.*

*Bubar continues: I was meeting with a newcomer to our church. He'd gone through the new member class but was reluctant to join. He'd been a Unitarian. He wasn't sure if he was a skeptic, a seeker or an agnostic, but he was pretty sure he was not a Presbyterian. He asked me a host of questions about the creeds, other religions, the relationship between faith and science and what it means to believe in Jesus. He nodded politely when I tried to formulate answers to each question, but I could tell I wasn't persuading him. In the end he said, "Thanks. I appreciate your time, but I just don't think this is for me." We shook hands and parted.*

*The next Sunday, guess who I saw slip quietly into the back of the church? He took his place in the pews, then stood and sang the hymns along with everyone else. He didn't join in the creed, I noticed. But when it was time for communion, he came shuffling down the aisle. I wanted to ask if he'd had some epiphany since our last conversation, but I didn't. Instead I said, "The body of Christ, given for you," and placed it into his hand. What is someone like that doing in church week in and week out? What is anyone doing here?*

*After the service, I greeted him and said, "Hey, I didn't expect to be seeing you again." He smiled and shrugged, the way I imagine Peter shrugged.*

*Lord, to whom can we go? Where else can we turn? ("Living By The Word," [Christian Century](#), August 22, 2012: 20)*

*How will we answer when our Lord turns to us and asks, "Do you also wish to go away?" Where else would we turn? To whom can we go?*

*Thanks be to God for the bread of life, for our eternal hope, for the Holy One from God. Amen.*