

There isn't any standing room available. With wall to wall people, they even flow out onto the street. It is already stifling in the building when atmospheric friction notches up the heat even more. People are getting restless and starting to fidget. From the looks and sounds of things, the once popular speaker is losing favor, and fast. Surprisingly, instead of backing down from what he's been saying, which has been really stirring the pot, he pushes ahead with his message.

As I scan the crowd, I see a number of different faces. One is a twenty-nine-year-old son, brother, and father. Born with fetal alcohol syndrome to a mom who died when he was very little and a dad who didn't stick around, he struggled tremendously throughout his teen years. Though he had become a follower of Christ as an older kid, and had heard Jesus' life-giving words as a youth, he is one who walks away from this relationship with Christ to one with drugs instead. Another is a single, middle-aged business owner who from the time she was an infant grew up in the faith community. As with other families across economic and racial lines, her childhood, and that of her siblings, had been peppered with verbal and physical abuse. At this stage of her life, she does not fully trust the Messiah to take care of her, so she has, at times, turned to mystical entities and practices outside of the Lord for sustenance. Just a few feet away is a fourteen-year-old Cuban girl born into a self-described Communist "nest." Her great-grandmother, though, used to talk to her about the Lord, sowing within her the seeds of God's Word. Despite having suffered physical abuse from her mother for her choice to follow Jesus and an ultimatum from her father, "choose God or me," she confesses, "Lord to whom can I go? You have the words of eternal life." Next to her stands an active retiree who, following in the footsteps of his family, raised, with his beloved wife, their own children in the faith. It has been some time since his partner has died, and as with any of us, grief, though it has perhaps faded, still lingers. As he now proudly witnesses their grandchildren

growing into *their* baptismal call, he objects to a teaching that's difficult to accept. And, making their way to the door on the other side are two young parents and three little children. Like all other individuals and families gathered, they too had been fed by Jesus and listened to him for some time. Slowly, however, as work and home commitments increased, and after the tragic death of the mom's sister in a car accident, this family has started to turn back, rejecting the arduous path of discipleship. There is one face though that I cannot immediately see. Mine.

As I stand amongst the vast throng of people, looking around and witnessing their reactions to Jesus' unconventional offering of himself as the bread of life, it dawns upon me that I do not righteously stand apart, but am one of them. Frustrated with the challenges of studying and preaching scripture, I have complained, "You got me into this God, why can't you make it easier? Why can't it be a quick process?" Despite being daily fed, there are times when I don't trust that the Spirit will continue to provide what I need for a sermon. I have rejected God's word when it has convicted me and struck my comfort zone, *and* when guilt has eaten away at me and I feel unworthy of forgiveness. When a close friend died, somewhat unexpectedly, my heart murmured, "Lord, to whom can we go? *You* have the words of eternal life." And for a period when I was dating Justin, I pulled back from my relationship with Christ.

"Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them." Though *we* have spent the last five weeks absorbing this Bread of Life scenario, it is still only the day after the tremendous feast by the lake. While just yesterday, after licking delicious leftover morsels of bread and fish off their fingers, the multitude touted Jesus as the prophet who is to come into the world, today the tides have turned. At first, they insisted that they always be given the bread of which he talked, then they complained about his assertion, then they began to argue about his teaching. And now, as the mixed batter bubbles over the pan, the reactions are as diverse as the people. Some of

them express dissatisfaction, while others don't believe or trust. Some of them turn back and no longer go about with him, while others stay, confessing faith in this Divine Disrupter. Similar to their ancestors who wandered in the desert for forty years, these people of God have experienced the Lord's miraculous provision, but they do not trust that God will *continue* to provide for them in their *own* wilderness trek. As Jesus has been making clear though, throughout this whole time, to partake of him as manna, as the bread of life, inherently involves a total reliance on God. As Susan Hylen contends, "the crowd was initially attracted to Jesus when they saw him as a Moses figure—one who could work miracles and provide political victories. As they continue with him, [however] they learn that [he] is not offering an easy victory but the long road of discipleship."

As we enter this text and scan the crowd of wall to wall people that even flows out onto the street, they are not just unknown faces from another far-off time and place. They are also *our* neighbors, *our* friends, *our* family members, and of course, ourselves. We come looking for Jesus. We come to be fed by him, again. His teaching at times, however, causes a pretty big stink. Leaving some of us to grumble. Some of us to not believe or trust. Some of us to completely dismiss it. Some of us to remain, confessing, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the worlds of eternal life." And some of us to walk away from our relationship with him. It also reveals though that we individually vacillate between these reactions at various moments in our own lives.

Abiding with Jesus is difficult. No question about it. Staying with him and learning from him is an *extensive process*. Like our brothers and sisters from long ago, the quick fix is so much more attractive. But Jesus offers something infinitely better. His very self.

"The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. I hunger to reconnect you with the one who first breathed you into being and to transform this hurting world. So dwell in me, as I dwell in you." Amen.