

[Jesus said,] <sup>56</sup>“Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. <sup>57</sup>Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. <sup>58</sup>This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever.” <sup>59</sup>He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum.

<sup>60</sup>When many of his disciples heard it, they said, “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?” <sup>61</sup>But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, “Does this offend you? <sup>62</sup>Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? <sup>63</sup>It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. <sup>64</sup>But among you there are some who do not believe.” For Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe, and who was the one that would betray him. <sup>65</sup>And he said, “For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father.” <sup>66</sup>Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. <sup>67</sup>So Jesus asked the twelve, “Do you also wish to go away?” <sup>68</sup>Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. <sup>69</sup>We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.”

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*Remember the Titans. Any Given Sunday. Hoosiers. We Are Marshall.* Those are some movies that contain a coach’s compelling motivational speech to a struggling team. Some TV shows have excelled at this as well: *Friday Night Lights* and *Ted Lasso* are the first that come to mind. My all-time favorite is from the movie *Miracle*, which is the story of Coach Herb Brooks leading the 1980 U.S. Men's Hockey Team to victory. Not once in my life have I played a game of ice hockey, but when Coach Brooks delivers his “Great moments are born from great opportunity” speech, I’m ready to lace up some skates and take on The Red

Machine. In all seriousness, though, there are real coaches out there who are magnificent at their craft. Dawn Staley, for example.

The “Bread of Life” discourse that Jesus has given is – to be blunt – the opposite of an inspirational speech delivered by a coach. Instead of a slow clap building up to thunderous applause, Jesus began with the thunderous applause and dismantled it to a slow clap. This discourse is from John’s gospel, and we’ve been walking through it for five weeks now. It began with a mass of 5,000 people flocking to him, and they grew hungry. So he took two fishes and five loaves and was able to feed them all. Amazing! They want to make him their king, but he is able to slip away. The next day, the crowd catches up with him, and he begins the “Bread of Life” discourse. It starts off okay, but it becomes convoluted. The people don’t know what to make of it. Then he starts bringing up the manna that God had given their ancestors in the wilderness; that bread was fleeting, but he himself is bread that is eternal. John tells us that a lot of the people grow angry and leave. Then today it says Jesus makes his way into a synagogue and continues on by saying people need to eat his flesh and drink his blood. Let’s be honest: this is purposefully unseemly language. John tells us at this point that people who Jesus counted as disciples are leaving. He is left with only twelve.

That is the opposite of a motivational speech. It’s as though the entire high school was ready to put on their sneakers and play some basketball for this Coach Jesus. The pep rally is on fire, yet when Coach Jesus begins his speech in front of the whole school, his words don't match the mood. Eventually students begin to walk out, even teachers; first slowly and soon all are flooding out the doors. When the coach wraps up his speech, he’s standing at the podium at center court, speaking to nearly empty bleachers. The only people left to field a basketball team are the girl who didn’t make the cut for volleyball, a bass drum player from the drumline, the quiet kid who always doodles in class, and the boy who sells illicit items from his locker. “The four of you will do,” Coach Jesus says as he invites them onto the court.

Back to the actual Jesus. The bread of life discourse whittled the 5,000 down to “the twelve,” which is the first time that term has been applied in this gospel. In John’s gospel, five already answered his call. The other seven were stragglers after the speech. Jesus looked at the twelve, and the passage says he knew that among them were some who didn’t believe his words, and he knew the one named Judas would betray him. So he takes a deep breath and asks the twelve, “Do you also wish to go away?” Peter replies with those famous words, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.” A better translation is, “Lord, we’ve seen the alternatives, and they aren’t good.” However, Peter then offers a statement of belief on behalf of the group, affirming that Jesus speaks words that offer eternal life. Yet, we just heard that some of them didn’t believe it, and most of them would later abandon Jesus. This pep talk appears by every standard to be an abject failure. Every “human” standard, that is.

A couple weeks ago I mentioned that John’s metaphysical understanding is that there is this world, this creation, yet it is in a shadowy state. What God is doing in John’s gospel is shining a light into that world. “For God so loved the world,” we are told. God wants all things to be drawn into the light of God’s love. If you’ve ever shined a flashlight into a dark space, you know that little critters will flee from it. Not unlike all the people who walked away from Jesus during this discourse. “For God so loved the world.” The people walking away is not the end of the story. What God is doing doesn’t even hinge on them. “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son.” Even more walked away from Jesus as he hung on the cross. John says that in that moment of his crucifixion is the judgment of the world, and everyone walks away. Yet... (our God is the God of “yets”) Yet, “the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” God wins. God’s love prevails. God’s judgment of the world is at hand, and the verdict is divine love beyond human comprehension.

We all like a good movie with a coach giving an exhilarating speech to rally the team to victory. Yet, that is not the story that God gives us. Instead, we have a story of most people quitting the team, the coach winds up crucified, and yet God goes on to win the championship. There are many possibilities for finding yourself in the story of this discourse. Like one of those who were drawn to this itinerant teacher giving out a miraculous meal. You may feel like one of the people who grew angry with Jesus. You may feel like some among the twelve who didn't actually have a full heart of belief. You might even feel like Peter who denied Jesus or like Judas who betrayed him. Or you might not feel like any of them, because the point is that the outcome doesn't hinge on any of us. God takes care of the outcome for us... not because of anything extraordinary we bring to the table... but because God loves this world enough to lay it all out on the field for us; to shine light into the darkness of this world; to bring hope where we can't muster it; to be the bread of life that we need; to bring life out from death.

Thanks be to God. Amen.