

Ultimate Expedition

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Church of the Ascension, Chicago

Father Patrick Raymond

Jesus said, "I am the bread which came down from heaven... the one who eats this bread will live forever." When many of his disciples heard this, they said, "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?" But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, "Does this offend you? Then what if you were to see the Son of man ascending to where he was before? It is the spirit that gives life, the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. 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. And he said, "For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father." Because of this many of the disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. So Jesus asked the twelve, "Do you also wish to go away?" Simon Peter answered 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." - John 6:60-69

In the summer after his sophomore year of high school, our son Owen took part in a wilderness endurance program known as Outward Bound. The aims of Outward Bound include building strength of character and resilience in young people by immersing them for several weeks in challenging natural environments.

Our older son Eliot had previously completed an Outward Bound program in Costa Rica. Owen wanted to blaze his own trail and became enthused about a program in the Scottish Highlands. The particular course he chose was and is called the 'Ultimate Expedition.'

Owen did not, however, anticipate homesickness. He didn't know before he arrived that he would be the only American in his group. And until he got there, he didn't know that, even in July, the Scottish Highlands are almost always rainy and cold.

Only a few days into the Ultimate Expedition, a fellow student who was bigger and seemed stronger than Owen bailed out of the program. Owen soon convinced himself, *"If he can't make it, there's no way I can."* A few nights later, still wet and cold and hungry, Owen decided that he, too, had made a big mistake and would quit the program.

Today's appointed gospel features some disciples of Jesus who decide to quit the program. These disciples have been hearing and contemplating and chewing on the bread of life teachings that we ourselves have been digesting for three weeks now, and Jesus is still not finished with them. *"I am the bread which came down from heaven,"* Jesus says again at the start of this morning's appointed text; and *"the one who eats this bread will live forever."*

But *"When many of his disciples heard this, they said, 'This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?'"* And later we learn that *"Because of this many of the disciples turned back and no longer went about with him."* Notice that in both instances those who faltered and ultimately turned back are described as disciples. They *had been* with Jesus. They *had seen the signs* that he had performed, and they *had been* caught up in the enthusiasm. They *had* sincerely imagined that they were 'all in' when they signed up for the ultimate expedition with him.

But no more. Now they are complaining. They say that they can no longer stomach these teachings of Jesus. And we know there are still today many disciples who turn away for all sorts of stated or implied reasons. Some can no longer make sense of or live with some particular teaching of Jesus or the church. Some are hurt or disillusioned by the hypocrisy of 'organized religion.' Some turn away because there is too much change in the church; others because change isn't happening fast enough. Sometimes the reasons ring true and other times the disciples seem to be avoiding what Bonhoeffer famously called 'the cost of discipleship.'¹

You and I would not still be here this morning were it not for the fact that not all of the disciples of Jesus turned back. In one of the most poignant moments in all the gospels, we are told in today's passage that Jesus asked the twelve, "*Do you also wish to go away?*" Simon Peter answered 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.*"

Notice that Peter does *not* say: "*We understand everything you've taught.*" Peter does not say to Jesus, "*Following you has been fun,*" or "*easy.*" Peter does not say that he himself hasn't *thought about* turning back. What Peter does say is, "*Lord, to whom can we go?*" It's a rhetorical question. There are lots of other places they could go. There were and are many other self-styled rabbis out there in the spiritual market-place, but "*You, Jesus, have the words of eternal life.*" *You are the real deal. You have become our lifeline, our umbilical cord to the very holiness of God.*

Many of us here, I gather, have undertaken worthy endeavors and then come to the place of despair or discouragement or reckoning with a high cost we couldn't have imagined at the start. We can recall that moment when we thought we couldn't keep going—followed by the moment in which we *do* keep going. Sometimes we clearly know why we keep going. Other times, we can't exactly name it. We are nudged or dragged or wooed forward by some inner voice or a sense of higher purpose, or an intuitive sense of light on our path that we can only describe as Christ or the Holy Spirit. I wonder what your circumstances or your moment may have been. And I wonder what challenging circumstances and deciding moments may still lie ahead, for you or me or us, or for little Aimee Zuleika Nevarez, who is to be baptized in a few moments.

"*Will you continue in the Apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?*" Or, "*Do you also wish to go away?*"

"*Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?*" Or, "*Do you also wish to go away?*"²

On the night that our son Owen decided to quit his Ultimate Expedition on the Scottish Highlands, he also decided to wait for a break in the rain to leave his tent and go tell his group leader. He waited so long that he fell asleep. When he woke in the morning it was still raining. He was still wet and cold and discouraged. But some still small voice inside of him compelled him to keep going. "*Just one more day,*" he decided. Maybe he realized he was in Scotland and had no idea how he would get home. Or maybe he was thinking about making it to the top of Ben Nevis, the highest point in the British Isles. Or maybe the Holy Spirit was with him in a way he did or did not recognize. In any case, I wouldn't have told you his story were it not for the fact that Owen *did* see the top of Ben Nevis and he *did* complete his Ultimate Expedition.

Why is it that we turn back or press on? Jesus suggests, in another layer of today's gospel, that it often hinges on our ephemeral and competing affinities with the 'flesh' and the 'spirit.' This duality may have been in the mind of the Spanish poet Juan Ramón Jiménez when he wrote that, "*What is glimpsed is more visible and lasts longer than what is seen.*"³ He meant, I gather, what is glimpsed by the heart, the glimpse by which you or I may, for instance, imagine Jesus looking over the shoulder of Peter and catching our own eye and asking, "*Do you also wish to go away?*" Jiménez could also imagine that Peter had caught such a glimpse as he responded to Jesus, "*No! We are not turning back. You have the words of eternal life.*" And if you or I have caught a few of our own glimpses of eternal life in Christ, we also decide to *not* turn back, to stay the course, to continue following Jesus on our own ultimate expedition. *Amen.*

¹ *The Cost of Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 1937.

² From the Baptismal Covenant in the *Book of Common Prayer*, pp. 304-305.

³ *The Complete Perfectionist: A Poetics of Work*, Juan Ramón Jiménez, transl. Christopher Maurer, 1997, p. 86.