

Discipleship from A to Z  
August 22, 2021 + Prop 16, Year B (BCP)  
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*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*

*"Expect accidents.  
Expect acne, additives, age, and airbags.  
Expect alcohol, allergies, and altitude.  
Expect analgesics.  
Expect animals, ankles, and antidepressants.  
Expect autopsy findings."*

Those are the opening lines of a poem by Katie Manning, based on words found in the index of the wildly popular book, *What to Expect When You're Expecting*, still in print and in its 5th edition after 37 years. Manning prefaced each index word, or short series of words, with the word *expect*.

I only recited the index topics, or expectations, that begin with the letter *a*:

*Accidents.  
Allergies.  
Autopsy findings.*

But Katie Manning goes on, and on, and on, all the way from A to Z.

*Expect failure [and] fantasies ...  
Expect lead exposure and lovemaking.  
Expect ... stomach bug[s] ... ticks ... touching ... warts ... x-rays ... zinc.*

I wonder what the first disciples of Jesus *expected* when they first followed him. Many had no doubt been caught up in the awe and hope that so many were feeling due to the many healings and other wonders. Recently, out in the wilderness, he had miraculously fed them, all of them, thousands. After that, Jesus had quietly disappeared in the night, but they pursued him, and found him. He started extemporizing on the miracle bread. Some who were there challenged and debated him. Things rapidly deteriorated, went from speculative to adversarial.

But what were his disciples expecting? They should have paid closer attention to some of the stories being told out there. On a recent visit to Jerusalem Jesus had healed a man, sick for thirty-eight years. It happened on a sabbath, and some by-the-book rabbis outed him about it. Every Galilean knew to keep a low profile in Jerusalem:

*Never question the temple-keepers – partly from respect, partly because they know more than you, and partly because if you get the slightest bit out of line there in Jerusalem, you can be sure they’ll summon the Roman security forces, and it won’t go well.*

But there was Jesus from Galilee, calling himself ‘Son of Man’ and ‘Son of God’ and going so far as to say, “anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life.” (Jn. 5:24)

And now here he was, calling himself *the bread that came down from heaven*, and “Whoever eats of this bread will live for ever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.” He kept using the word *believe*. Not only did he want everyone to believe things about him, he had said that they – we – needed to *believe in him*.

So it happened, as we heard at the end of today’s gospel, that “many of the disciples turned back and no longer went about with him.” Earlier in the same text, we heard an explanation: “... many of his disciples ... said, ‘This teaching [about eating his body as if it was the manna from heaven] is difficult; who can accept it?’” To be fair to those deserters, the teachings now laid out in Chapter 6 of John are difficult. Believing Christian theologians have debated the meanings, sometimes fiercely, ever since this gospel was written.

In addition to the theological enigmas, there was the mounting conflict. Jesus had called them to take part in a radical reformation. They should have expected that a counter-reformation would arise to quash it – Jesus first, and then his pretentious reformation, including, maybe, them. A verse in the chapter before today’s reading says they “were seeking all the more to kill Jesus, because he was .... calling God his own Father, thereby making himself equal to God.” (5:18) Many of the disciples of Jesus would have had rabbis and family members back home, fomenting the anti-Jesus paranoia. Yard signs were popping up everywhere, “Stop the steal ... of our heritage, our religion and our God.” Why not play it safe, go back home to the familiar misery of normalcy?

I learned of Katie Manning’s poem about so many expectations through a reading of it that I recently heard by her fellow poet Pádraig Ó Tuama. He comments, in part, “This poem knows that anything might happen. And in [the poem’s] arrangement ... [it is] slightly overwhelming. And ... that’s part of the point ....this poem is trying to say, THIS IS WHAT IT’S LIKE TO BE OVERWHELMED.”<sup>1</sup>

How could the disciples of Jesus NOT be overwhelmed? They had been caught up in the Jesus hype but until now had never considered all of the A to Z implications and expectations of genuine discipleship.

Some of us may recall a time when we *similarly turned back and no longer went about with him*. We had too many unanswered questions. We got caught in the middle of some ugly and threatening religious feud. We were overwhelmed.

“Many of the disciples turned back and no longer went about with him.”

In this context, what follows in the gospel is particularly poignant. *Jesus asked the twelve, "Do you also wish to go away?"* In the midst of all of his confident assertions about his divinity, this seems a profoundly human moment, even laden perhaps with loneliness and soul-searching. And this part of the text is all the more humanized by the first intimations of his betrayal by Judas.

*Do you also wish to go away?*

"Simon Peter answered him, *"Lord, to whom can we go?"* It's a complicated initial response. Hearing it, we can't rule out that Peter and the others have wondered and talked about their options: *'Dad has hung onto the fishing boat and the nets, just in case, right?'* But Peter says to Jesus, *"Lord, to whom can we go?"*

And then: clarity, Peter's rousing affirmation, *"You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."*

Peter's response is, among other things, a commitment, or perhaps a re-commitment, to persevere, with Jesus, come what may, A to Z. Even so, Peter may have been thinking that what Jesus expected of them was not only different but far more than they could have ever imagined when they had started out with him. Following has become more complicated. They are way less sure where all this is going, as may be the case with some of us.

At the same time, as may be the case with some of us, things have become simpler, clearer, because of Jesus. Peter is answering not only for himself, but for the twelve to whom Jesus posed the question, and for countless generations of subsequent believers, including us, when he says to Jesus: *"You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."*

*We're not going anywhere else.*

Amen.

<sup>1</sup> [From the June 18, 2021, podcast, Poetry Unbound.](#)