**Sermon for August 25,2024 John 6:56-69 “How Much is Too Much?”**

Jesus said, “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. 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.” He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum. When many of his disciples heard it, 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 his 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.”

I didn’t play any Mozart this morning…I’m really more of a baroque kinda guy. But that last Bach piece, the little Prelude in C, reminded me of a famous situation that Mozart got into when he premiered an opera at the Hapsburg court. You have probably seen this scene in the movie *Amadeus*, the one where Mozart’s music leaves Joseph II, the emperor of Hapsburgian Austria quite befuddled, and sonically overwhelmed. The emperor’s conclusion is that there were simply too many notes! Just remove some, and it will be perfect! And of course, our young hot-headed Herr Mozart bristles, and reminds them that he is the composer, and that his work requires *exactly* the number of notes that he put to paper, no more and no less. He is not in the employ of the emperor for much longer after that…simply too many notes. Mozart and his music were just too much.

You know, I have compared Jesus to countless things over my decades of preaching; the usual ones that he himself claims, of course, like Good Shepherd, Bread of Life, Son of Man, those titles, but also, I have discussed how he was like a bass player in a jazz combo, or a master gardener, or a super-fast reiki practitioner, but I have never yet compared Our Lord to a composer, until today. Today, we hear Jesus overwhelming his followers with the intense harmonies of his life’s work. The symphony he is writing for humanity has, to quote Joseph the II of Austria, simply too many notes. Too demanding. Most of the human race ever since has roughly agreed with His Excellency, that Jesus’ song for the world is just too hard to play, and often too hard to listen to, even. This composer, Jesus the Christ, requires a lot of notes for the fulness of his message to get developed, and for a lot of people, Christianity is just too much.

We recognize composers, of course, by their famous themes. When you hear this, (play *Jesu, Joy of Our Desiring*), you know you are listening to Bach. When you hear this, (play *9th Symphony*), you say, oh, yeah, Beethoven! Jesus the Cosmic Composer used big, broad, recognizable themes too, and we rehearse them every week. Justice, compassion, holiness, love, that list can go on. But then today, in the Gospel of John, he goes a little far, talking about eating his flesh and drinking his blood and how we then live in him, and he lives in us. He says regular bread, even the famous manna from heaven, is just a temporary fix, a culinary band-aid, and we will hunger again and eventually, we will die, unless we eat of him, the true bread from heaven, the bread of eternity. And so much of humanity over the centuries was discomforted by this, yelling: hey there, Mozart, too far, too many notes!

*This* text, of course, has led the Church universal into endless controversy and not a few wars. *This* text led our Roman Catholic forbears to develop the sacramental doctrine of *transubstantiation,* the position that the bread and wine are transformed into the actual flesh and blood of Christ. This was the common understanding for the first two-thirds of Christian practice, but then Luther and other reformers could bear this level of ‘superstition’ no longer. In Britain, Henry VIII broke with Rome and created the Anglican church, for many reasons, but certainly also because of this doctrine. The years after his death were a roller-coaster of bloodshed and violence against Catholics and/or Protestants, depending on *when* you are discussing, but by as soon as 1563, during the reign of his daughter [Elizabeth I](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elizabeth_I), the [Church of England](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Church_of_England) declared: "*Transubstantiation (or the change of the substance of Bread and Wine) in the Supper of the Lord, cannot be proved by holy Writ; but is repugnant to the plain words of Scripture, overthroweth the nature of a Sacrament, and hath given occasion to many superstitions*".

Fast forward with me to our own time, and hear the words of Roman Catholic renegade John Dominic Crossan: “My point, once again, is not that those ancient people told literal stories and we are now smart enough to take them symbolically, but that they told them symbolically and we are now dumb enough to take them literally.” This is a nice, tight summation of the average Protestant reality: that we understand the Lord’s Supper

in a symbolic way, as a re-enactment. For us, all the elaborate theology surrounding transubstantiation is simply too many notes! And if that is the song we were required to play, we would not remain in that orchestra!

Now, the original disciples were the first to have this adverse reaction to Jesus’ teaching, grumbling about discordant harmony and it all being just too much. And he responds much like Mozart did to the criticism of ‘simply too many notes’ – he plays the composer card, and says “*Does this offend you? How would you feel if you were to see me ascending to where I was before*? In other words, **I am the composer**, telling the heavenly truth through my music, and this phrase stays, it is part of the whole symphony.Because, he continues*, 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 this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by God*.”

Music has been a large part of my life for the last fifty-five years, and this I have learned: that some styles of music are easy to hear, while others are an acquired taste, and still others will *always* be a mystery to me. In music as in life, there is a range of palatable, acceptable, digestible material. And it is *the same* in religions, specifically Christianity for us: some styles of Christian practice are easy to do, while others are an acquired taste, and still others will always be a mystery to us. Our error, if we make one, is to assume that we have to absorb and approve the entire range of Christian practice for our faith to be valid. And as much as I would like to support that kind of devotion, that kind of thinking is just plain nuts. Just as you can be a real musician playing the kazoo and one-finger piano, you can be a real Christian without getting a doctorate in Theology! Some music will always be beyond my appreciation, just as some versions of Christianity will always be simply too much. The question to be answered is found in the sermon title, how much is too much?

Jesus seems a little deflated that the bulk of the followers don’t groove to his version of jazz, deflated that his compositions are leaving some of them cold. So he says to the remnant, the core band, the original Dirty Dozen, “Do you also wish to go away?” And here, right here, Simon Peter untangles the whole skein. We need to ask how much is too much, and Jesus asks the disciples if it is too much for them, and our buddy Peter shares a rare insight: *“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.”* We’ve traveled this far, seen the miracles, done some healing ourselves, and have a deep appreciation for you and your music. It’s too late to go back to two-chord ukulele songs now; you have made us symphony men! If we want the holy music filling our souls and firing our hearts, we know just one guy who writes that kind of music. You. Jesus. So I guess that if some of it is too complex and some of it is too discordant and some of it makes no sense at all to me, you are still the composer of my life, and I am with you.

Only you can answer for you, and I for me, *how much is too much* in our following of Jesus. But I’ll take Peter as my inspiration when I am discouraged in my faith, cause he got it right. Our world has thousands of songwriters and composers and musical artists of varying skills, but only one Jesus. And if *he* gets your heart to singing and your toe to tapping, you will learn to appreciate more and more notes, denser textures, more complicated arrangements. How much is too much will become, eventually, a rhetorical question. Amen.