

Message: Challenge to Believe**[*YouTube clip of The Piano Guys playing “Bourne Vivaldi”*]¹****What are you thinking?**

I expect that’s the question going through your minds. What does a video of a Mormon piano player and cellist playing the theme from the Jason Bourne movies while riding on a flatcar, have to do with John 6? Well, on the face of it, nothing at all. But, if you step outside of your normal perspective and look at it a different way, there’s an application.

The original music was written Antonio Vivaldi, an Italian composer and virtuoso violinist, who lived from 1678-1741. That would officially be termed “classical music.” The only people likely to listen to it would be old, orchestra geeks or people who are out of touch with the modern, IYTE, hip-hop world. A classical version of the song would get a big thumbs’ down most of the time.

If we change our perspective, though, it’s surprising what can happen. Most of us recognized the theme from the Jason Bourne movies. The arrangement and vitality of the participants drew us in. Putting the performers on an open platform on a train moving toward northern Utah’s snow covered mountains is very engaging. It draws us in a new way. We find ourselves inspired and actively listening, even though the original music is dated. And that’s very applicable to our Scripture for today from John 6:56-69, for we are called to share the good news of Jesus Christ in ways that engage and inspire people in our world today.

To get the full scope and impact of Jesus’ words and Simon Peter’s response, we have to look at what has happened earlier. Jesus left Capernaum and traveled across the Sea of Galilee in a boat with the disciples. There he miraculously fed 5,000 people from five barley loaves and two fish. Later that night Jesus walked across the water to join the disciples, telling them “*I am; do not be afraid*” (v20).

The crowd was smart enough to realize only one boat left, so when they came to Capernaum, they engaged Jesus in a conversation about what happened. What follows is a series of questions and answers. Jesus is teaching them, but they are struggling to understand what he’s

¹ www.youtube.com/watch?v=09RUuTAM2H0

telling them. Just like most of us would struggle to embrace a traditional recording of Vivaldi, the people struggled to understand the words coming from a man they knew as a carpenter-turned-teacher.

The people first ask, “*Rabbi, when did you come here?*” (v25). They know something unusual happened. Jesus answers, “*...you’re looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves*” (v26). They aren’t coming to Jesus because they have faith. They are spiritually hungry and are looking for a quick fix. They want to see signs and miracles – the equivalent of junk food. It tastes great when you eat it, but it doesn’t sustain. In fact, it makes us even hungrier for real food. But they don’t understand what real food is.

The people tell Jesus they are familiar with heavenly food, they know about the manna Moses gave them to eat (v31). Jesus reminds them the manna came from God, not from Moses (v32), and then Jesus says, “*...the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world*” (v33). The people say what any of us would at that point, “*Sir, give us this bread always*” (v34).

Jesus gives them what they ask, but he tells them they won’t accept it. Jesus says, “*I am the bread of life*” (v35). Jesus tells the people he came down from heaven to do God’s will: to save us and give us eternal life. Jesus even tells them he will take those who believe he is the Son of God to heaven (v40). Even today, when we speak those words, there’s a thrill. It begs us to ask questions, to engage with the one who said them.

The people’s response: they begin to complain. Jesus was right, they don’t get it. They’re focused on Abraham, Moses and prophets, and the Law – the way things have always been done, and they can’t see who is right in front of them. All they can see is Joseph and Mary’s son, the neighborhood carpenter. They see no reason to think Jesus is divine. Yes, he’s been blessed by God to be a prophet and he can do some miraculous things, but the Son of God? That’s too much to ask anyone to believe! Don’t we hear that same complaint from friends, family and different media sources every week?

Jesus takes it a step further, telling the people to stop complaining (v43). God is teaching us and calls us to believe in Jesus (v45). All who

believe will have eternal life (v47). There's a catch: only one thing can give us eternal life and that's the living bread, Jesus Christ. There's no other heavenly food that can save us from death. Jesus said, "*I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh*" (v51).

That's when people began to argue with each other, saying "*How can this man give us his flesh to eat?*" (v52). It's a good question: do you accept and believe him or do you reject Jesus' words and gift? The argument appears to continue for several days, because v59 tells us Jesus answers their question while teaching in the synagogue in Capernaum, where he lived with Peter and his family. This is a difficult teaching. It's difficult to read and study today as well.

Jesus said, "*unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you*" (v53). Jesus is even more specific about the nature of his flesh and blood. All who eat Jesus' flesh and drink Jesus' blood abide in him and he in them. "Abide in me" also means "remain in me." Other translations are "to stand, wait, live, endure, continue to be present, or maintain unbroken fellowship" with Christ. Jesus wants you to continue to live in his presence because he will be present and there for us in an enduring, untiring, patient, loving way.

Jesus affirms the power of his promise in v57, "*Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me.*" Jesus is here by the will of God, the living Son of God. He is God, eternal, all-powerful and sovereign. The Creator who made all things will give us eternal life if we believe his Son, Jesus Christ, is our Lord and Savior. Those are powerful words! We're not surprised by them, but we're 2,000 years removed and we have the benefit of reading the story in a Bible and hearing a sermon on it.

The disciples' response shows us how radical the message is. In v60 they say, "*This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?*" They're complaining, most likely outside, where they think Jesus won't hear them. But Jesus knows the disciples are complaining. He acknowledges their concern, saying "*Does this offend you?*" (v61). But Jesus doesn't back off. He challenges their attitude and faith.

Jesus challenges the large group who called themselves disciples, saying, “[*If you think eating my flesh and drinking my blood is hard*], *what would you do if you saw the Son of Man ascending to heaven?*” (v62, rephrased). In other words, this is the easy part. We haven’t gotten to the hard part yet: abandonment, denial, death on a cross, three days in the ground and resurrection. After that is accomplished, Jesus will return to heaven. If they don’t believe in Jesus now, what hope will they have later? Jesus confronts them because they’re willing to go along when things are easy, but start to grumble and complain when things become difficult.

Jesus gives us the same challenge today. We can call ourselves believers, come to church, say all the right words, know all the “in” people and still be dead inside. If we can’t, or won’t, hear God’s call and respond in a life-changing way, we are eating bread and drinking from the cup, but we are dead. We do not have eternal life. Yes, it’s possible to say, “Jesus is my Lord, save me” and still be spiritually dead.

Paul teaches us in Romans 10:9, “*...if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.*” The words we speak are part of it, but it’s what we believe in our innermost being that makes the difference. And that’s the guidance Jesus offers to the disciples in John 6:63, “*It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.*”

I believe v63 is pivotal to understanding the gospel message as United Methodists. Jesus offers us a glimpse into a deep mystery. It’s not about real flesh and blood, it’s what they represent. Jesus’ body and blood represent the spiritual food we need to remain in an enduring, unbroken fellowship with God. If we read Jesus’ words and believe them, we are responding to God’s call. This is the work of grace through the Holy Spirit. Even though the message is confusing at times and our friends and family “just don’t get it” and we’re frustrated with how to actually apply what we’re learning in our every day life, we have a spiritual bond, a connection to Christ. We have to grow spiritually to be able to sustain our faith; but no matter how tentatively or weak we are, Jesus is always there, if we are willing to try.

Jesus' words are challenging. They teach us that there are times when we have to get on board the train or move out of the way so others can get on board, because the train is leaving the station. They challenge us to move beyond the basics of faith, to grow and mature so we know what it means to be a disciple. The words of Hebrews 5:13 tell us, "...for everyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is unskilled in the word of righteousness." We need to be fed on the meat of God's Word to know how to be right with God.

As a result of his challenging teaching, many of Jesus' disciples left and no longer followed him. That has much to say about the nature of conflict and growth in the church. To me, Jesus' last question is the most telling of all. After all that happened during week, Jesus turned to the twelve disciples he had appointed as his inner circle. Knowing Judas was with them and that he would betray him, Jesus asked them, "*Do you also wish to go away?*" He wanted to know what was on their heart.

The disciple's response is faithful and true, speaking to the very heart of our faith. Many of us know Simon Peter's words by heart, "*Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.*" Peter says what the twelve know to be true: Jesus is who he says he is, the Son of God. Jesus' words are true and he has backed them up by his thoughts, words and deeds.

And so we come full circle. I began the sermon with a video clip of The Piano Guys performing a Vivaldi classic in a new, upbeat and engaging way. When we watch the video, we are drawn in by their passion and the beauty of art, which gives us a glimpse of something beyond our normal, every day life.

If a classic piece of music, inspired by Vivaldi's faith, can be presented in a way that attracts children, youth, adults to the classics, what keeps us from sharing our faith and love of God with others in the same way? It doesn't matter whether we are world-class artists, evangelists, pastors or construction workers, stay at home parents or not, it's the passion and depth of our love and faith that will make a difference. Authentic love means caring for others and building them up, not complaining and withholding grace. God is calling others to the feast.

Are you ready to get on the train?

John 6:56-69 (NRSV)

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.”