

*A Time to Decide*  
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There are moments in life when it's time to make a decision. We can no longer waver between what we will and will not do. We must decide if we will move forward or remain behind.

The people of Israel faced such a moment after they crossed the River Jordan and entered the Promised Land. Joshua challenged them to decide whom they would serve: the gods they worshipped in Egypt or the God who delivered them from slavery. A similar situation occurs in today's gospel. Many of Jesus' disciples murmur that his claim to be the bread of life is too difficult. Aware that some of his own disciples are complaining, Jesus replies that if they find *this* teaching too harsh, what will they do when they see him ascending to heaven from whence he came? It is the Spirit of God that gives life, Jesus says, not what is earthbound and destined to perish.

It is at this juncture in his ministry that many of Jesus' disciples—perhaps most of them—decide to leave him. The time for straddling the fence has ended; the moment of decision has arrived. And they choose the flesh (what they can see, touch, and hear) rather than the Spirit that brings life. Turning to his few remaining disciples, Jesus asks, “Do you wish to leave as well?” to which Peter replies, “To whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.”

For some time now, I have been thinking that American Catholicism has arrived at just such a moment of decision. All of us know people who have left the church: neighbors, friends, relatives, our own children. They have left for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is the scandal of the past decade. Others have simply lost the habit of attending church and participating in the Eucharist. Still others have become angry and disillusioned. And many simply no longer believe that Jesus has the words of eternal life. How serious is the situation? If all the Catholics who have left the Church formed their own denomination, that denomination of former Catholics would be the second largest church in the United States today, larger than any Protestant church.

So what are we who remain—we who we believe that Jesus has the words of life—to do? Should we simply let them go and say good riddance? Are we to let those who once shared in Christ's life leave us so easily? Should we reconcile ourselves to a smaller church that will eventually become marginalized and irrelevant? I hope not.

This summer I have given a great deal of thought about what I would like to accomplish in the time God has allotted me to be your pastor. And it seems to me there is nothing more important than reaching out to those who have left us for whatever reason. After all, our brothers

and sisters who have left us once enjoyed the words of eternal life. They once shared the Eucharist with us. Is it not time to invite them back to share in our common life once more?

I have had a recurring and disturbing vision, which I am afraid to tell you because it means dramatic change in our lives. I am afraid to tell you the vision because I am not sure where the Spirit of God might lead us if we follow the vision. I am afraid to tell you the vision, ... but I must.

*What if* our parish community were set afire by the flame of God's Spirit? *What if* the fire of the Spirit began to burn anew in our hearts? *What if* the fire of God's Spirit in our parish set aflame the parishes around us? *What if* the fire of the Spirit began to rage throughout the whole Farmington River Valley, and from here to Hartford, and New Haven, and Boston, and Portland, and Burlington, and Providence? *What if* the Spirit of God began to engulf the whole of New England Catholicism once more? *What if* every family or individual at church today decided to bring back one, just one, family or person that has fallen away. *What if* ...?

You and I have remained with Christ because we believe that he has the words of life—words that we must share with those who have left us. As we receive the Eucharist today, let us pray that God will set aflame our hearts with the fire of the Spirit so that we can bring the gospel to those who have left us.

This is what I want to do this year.