A pastor made the mistake of wearing his clerical collar on an airplane trip. “Why are you wearing that outfit?” the woman seated next to him asked. “Because I’m a Christian pastor,” he replied. “Interesting,” she said. “Why are you a Christian?” He thought about that question for a moment. Instead of giving her the book answer, he gave her the answer in his heart. “Well,” he said. “I’m a Christian because Jesus loves me, and knowing that, I can’t be anything else. For me, there’s No Middle Ground.”

Today, we come to the end of a four-week journey through the sixth chapter of John. In it, Jesus has spoken often and at length of who he is and what he offers – the bread of eternal life. He has fed the multitudes on real loaves, offered himself as the bread of heaven, invited his followers to feast on his body and blood, and endured carping and complaints from Jewish authorities. One group after another has turned away. John 6 begins with a large crowd of thousands; it ends with a hard core of a dozen. And one of those is disloyal.

Believing in the divinity of Christ is no easier for the 12 who remain with him than for the crowds who desert him. Either people believe in his divinity, or they do not. Some people’s lack of belief Jesus takes in stride. “I know there are some non-believers among you.” Says Mary Lynn Hudson: “Even today, when people come to Christianity looking for something to satisfy the gnawing hunger deep beneath the surface of their lives, many of them exit the door and never return.” There is No Middle Ground with Jesus.

In last week’s selection from John 6, Jesus graphically describes a true believer as “one who chomps my flesh and gulps my blood.” This offends observant Jews, who never consume blood. I think it probably offends us as it did those listeners. We tend to wonder how much easier it would have been to believe in Jesus in his own day. But even when he walked the earth in the flesh people turned away from Jesus because his mode and manner was too radical. Jesus asks The Twelve, his most important disciples, if they also are going to leave. Peter replies, “To whom would we go?” In his straightforward way, Peter answers for all of us – there is no other ground on which to stand. Though there are many other philosophies and self-styled authorities to choose from, Jesus alone has the words of eternal life. Still, Peter’s reasons for staying are less than a ringing endorsement. In effect, Peter confesses, “This work you’ve called us to do is hard. Most of us would probably prefer to walk away. But we have come to believe that you have the words of true life. So we’re staying, even though we know how hard this is going to be.” At least Peter doesn’t take the Middle Ground. He commits to Jesus. Of course, Jesus doesn’t appeal to everyone.
He is constantly the center of conflict and even seems determined to court opposition. The question Jesus poses to Peter and the disciples is put to the believer in every age: “Will you stay with me? Or do you also wish to go away?” Believers have two choices, No Middle Ground. Will our response be to believe in Christ unreservedly? Or reject Christ? And reject Christ’s church? The middle-ground position would be to disavow certain teachings and accept others. That’s a Conflict Avoidance strategy. Most people really don’t enjoy conflict and like to avoid or resolve it quickly. The same goes for churches. If we say there is No Middle Ground in a faith-relationship with Christ, we find ourselves in a conflict situation: We have to choose. Stick with Jesus completely or don’t call yourself a Christian. Statistics for most congregations (not this one, remarkably) show a substantial gap between the number of persons affiliated and the number who actually show up to do the Lord’s work. People seem to gravitate towards the middle. Participation in mainline churches is declining at least in part because people join seeking things the church was never intended to supply, like social compatibility, cultural status, and theological certainty. People leave the church (and sometimes their faith) for all sorts of reasons, some much more trivial than church doctrine. Sometimes a life crisis drives people away. Sometimes members drive away other members. What keeps us connected? The promise of Eternal Life, most would say. Where else can we go for Eternal Life? Mathematics? Chemistry? Physics? Astronomy? Sociology? Psychology? Interplanetary travel? Churches face a great temptation to hold congregations together by making membership more enticing. That’s a mass-market approach. A mistake churches should avoid is to make membership too easy. This is less than the full Gospel and not a way to Eternal Life. Joining a church is actually a big deal. It involves a big commitment. In church participation, there’s No Middle Ground. We must not offer the world less-than-full Spirit-life just in order to be popular. Another aspect of church that holds it together is the sacraments: baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Baptism is a rite of belonging and beginning. It is the start of a life journey with Christ. In the movie “Tender Mercies,” the character played by Robert Duvall returns from a church service in which he and his stepson are baptized. The stepson asks, “Do you feel any different?” Duvall’s response is, “Not yet.” The two sacraments are different in frequency. Baptism occurs only once in a life, virtually all Christians agree. It does not need repeating. You are either baptized or you aren’t.
The Lord’s Supper is different from baptism; it happens many times in our lives, each time binding us together a little more. Not that the sacrament isn’t completely effective and needs repeating. It’s that our faith lives aren’t effective, so we need grace upon grace. The Lord’s Table is where individual believers are most like themselves, yet at the same time most like one another. The simple elements of communion are not magical potions that grant immortality. Rather, each element involves the worshiper in the life and death of Jesus. Which includes the conflicts Jesus created. There is always a centrifugal force in church life. The more people here Jesus’ radical message, the more they divide into two camps – the honest seekers who want to understand more and those who reject Jesus because they don’t like what they have heard. The teachings of Jesus divide. That’s the simple truth. There is No Middle Ground with Jesus. Nothing about faith in Christ is reasonable. Nothing about faith is the product of study or the accumulation of knowledge. In fact, one way to DISBELIEVE is by trying to think your way to faith. How do we come to believe in Jesus? Belief develops from three sources: One way we come to believe is through a relationship with authority figures in our lives. But when their authority falls into question, our belief may fall as well. Another way we come to believe is through our commitments to other people, or to religious institutions. We make public our private beliefs and values. That’s how political parties stay connected. A third way we come to believe is through personal experience. Things happen to us, or to those we know, that cannot be explained any other way except, “It’s a God thing.” God of Scripture is also God of experience: the one who approaches us, reaches out, and abides in us. The great Christian Creeds through the ages have synthesized all three approaches: authority, membership, and experience. A creed is one response to Jesus’ rhetorical question, “My teaching is difficult. Can you accept it?” The Nicene Creed, first issued in 325 A.D., expresses the core Trinitarian beliefs of the early church, still held by the church today. Take a look at page 34 in the hymnal. The three initial words of the Creed, “We believe in...” affirm a covenant relationship – not between believer and God, but between believer and belief itself. In order to represent our actual beliefs, a creed must be affirmed completely, unconditionally, and without reservation. We are better able to do this some days than others. Rev. William Willimon recalls seminary days. In a church history course at Yale Divinity School, a professor invited an Orthodox priest to lecture. He gave a rather dry talk on the development of the Nicene Creed. At the end of the lecture an earnest student asked, “Father Theodore, what can one do when one finds it impossible to state certain tenets of the Creed?” The priest looked confused. “Well, you just say it.
It's not that hard to master. With effort, most people learned by heart.”
“No, you don’t understand,” continued the student. “What am I to do when I have difficulty affirming parts of the Creed – like the Virgin Birth?”
The priest continued to look confused. “You just say it, particularly when you have difficulty believing it, you just keep saying it. It will come to you eventually.”
Exasperated, the student, typical of the 1960s, pleaded, “How can I with integrity affirm a creed I do not believe in?”
“It’s not your Creed!” thundered the priest. “It’s our Creed. Keep saying it, for heavens sake! Eventually, it may come to you. Even if it doesn’t, don’t worry. It’s not your Creed.”

CONCLUSION
Our lesson touches on the human difficulty in sustaining belief, especially when past experience, personal observation, or the exercise of reason intrudes on an unquestioned faith.
“Faith,” writes Martin Kich, “is the willingness to suspend our usual distrust of anything that violates practical considerations or logical conclusions.” For me, to know who Jesus is, to believe in him, I must suspend the divide of doubt and view God’s Son from God’s perspective. The teachings of Christ are indeed difficult. I do not presume that some people more easily accept the teachings of Jesus than others. No, even the most faith-filled person is still challenged by the hard teachings of Christ.

Peter’s explanation of his faith is typical: “We have come first to believe and thereby to know that you are the Holy One of God.”

No Middle Ground.
“It might be nice,” suggests Rev. Brent Copeland of Tallahassee, “to live without God’s all-encompassing claim upon our lives. But here’s the rub: Could we also live without the grace that comes with the claim? I can’t,” says Copeland. “Perhaps some people can, but I wouldn’t even want to try.”

Peter speaks for the entire church when he asks, “To whom else can we go for eternal life?”

Faith is the truth encounter with Jesus, the bread of life. We do not effectuate that encounter. We do not pray enough, give enough, create enough, or serve enough to become Jesus-worthy. Jesus comes to us. He offers himself to would-be followers in and outside of the church. It’s all grace. Either we see and hear his life-giving self and believe, or we don’t. God sets the table for us, and we either eat or we don’t. There’s No Middle Ground. Amen.