John 6:51-58

51I 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.’ 52 The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, ‘How can this man give us his flesh to eat?’53So Jesus said to them, ‘Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.54Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day;55for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink.56Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.57Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me.58This 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.’

Did Jesus Really Say That?

Imagine someone new to the church, new to any church, listening to these words. Jesus says, “unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood, you have no life in you.” And that person may look around and say, “Wow, I wonder what happened to Jesus.” He may be a little uncomfortable sitting in the middle of a room full of cannibals, nervously looking for an exit, just in case the people around pull out forks and knives.

We can laugh because we are numb to such statements about eating the body and drinking the blood of Jesus. Every month as we celebrate communion, we hear, “this is my body given for you…this is my blood, shed for you,” and we know this is metaphor. Jesus is not requesting that a crowd attack him with utensils. And though we may not all agree on what happens during the Eucharist, we understand that we are eating bread and drinking wine that represent Jesus’ body and blood.

Jesus often spoke in metaphors, particularly in the Gospel of John; he says “I am the bread…I am the true vine…I am the gate…I am the light…” We understand that Jesus is not literally a shrub or a door or a candle. But when he carries the metaphor to the point of being grotesque, of being offensive, isn’t that going too far? What surprises me about the passages we’ve been reading over the past three weeks is that Jesus doesn’t bother explaining the metaphor to those who are offended. It is our natural tendency to clarify misunderstandings, or even to re-state things in such a way so as not to create conflict. One of my favorite lines from a movie is in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?”* where three convicts escape from prison, and two of them argue about who is going to be in charge. One says, “I’m in charge.” Another says, “I’m in charge.” When they both ask the third convict who should be in charge, he say, “I’m with you guys.” We want to keep peace. We like it when everybody gets along, when there’s nobody offended and everybody seems happy.

But Jesus isn’t concerned about offending his audience. In fact he takes an offensive metaphor and compounds it; last week and the week before Jesus is talks of his flesh being the bread of life, and that was hard enough for his audience to digest (sorry). This week Jesus adds fuel to the fire by saying that if you want to live, you must not only eat his flesh but drink his blood as well. If Jesus had been running for office, I doubt that even Joe Biden’s campaign manager could put an inoffensive spin on this statement.

And the consequence of Jesus’ choice of words is that many disciples stopped following him. His poll numbers just took a nose dive. And the fact that Jesus “stirs the pot” rather than “smoothing things over” tells us something important about his character; he’s not interested in being a crowd-pleaser. He’s not trying to help everyone go away happy, not trying to tell people exactly what they want to hear. He’s not trying to win an election or sell himself on others. He has a message that he is compelled to deliver, a message that may offend a lot of people, that may drive people away, but he will not compromise that message in order to seem more attractive to his audience. “Unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood, you have no life in you.”

Some of you may have heard on the news last month about a pastor who refused to marry a black couple in their own church. The reason given by the pastor was that some people in the congregation had expressed opposition to a black couple getting married in their church, so at the last minute the pastor arranged to marry the couple in a neighboring church and thus avoid any controversy. But his actions site effect. When the local media found out about it, the story went national, and controversy was exactly what ensued. Many members of the church said that they didn’t even know that other members of their church were opposed to having the wedding in their church, and later apologized to the newlyweds. But by that time the damage was already done. A couple who thought that they were worshiping in a church where they were loved and accepted discovered on the eve of their wedding that they were not so loved and accepted by many in the church.

The part of this story that concerns me personally is not the bigotry of some of the members; what concerns me is the pastor’s actions, his intent to avoid controversy. Can I imagine myself facing such a situation? Absolutely. How often I am tempted to “tone down” a sermon, or change the wording so as not to offend one person or a contingent of people, how I sugar-coat a message so I don’t drive folks away. Can’t I just give a sermon that makes everyone feel warm and fuzzy? Can’t I just make everyone happy, and in doing so attract other people to our happy, warm, fuzzy church? Isn’t that what I’m supposed to be doing?

No! No! No! If we dare to consider ourselves disciples of Jesus, we must be ready to say things and do things that will drive some people, perhaps many people, away from our church. Nothing we say should be said vindictively or hatefully; everything should be said and done in a Spirit of love. But we are here to be disciples and to make disciples, not just to fill the pews or the fellowship hall. And if, in our endeavor to be disciples or to make disciples, we say or do something that drives folks away, we may be doing exactly what we are supposed to be doing, distinguishing true disciples from spectators who wish only to be entertained, challenging one another to mature in faith, speaking truth, even when the truth is hard to swallow. I confess that one of the greatest challenges for me was to accept a *rebuke* given a fellow Christian. I was well enough disciplined in the social skills that I could listen to the criticism without flying off the handle; I nodded and thanked my Christian brother for his critique. Yet inside I seethed! I thought to myself that this critic was self-righteous. I started rationalizing, justifying the behavior for which I was being rebuked, saying to myself that the one who criticized me didn’t know what he was talking about and should just mind his own business. I stopped talking to this person, avoided him whenever possible, smiling at him during social hour, but avoiding conversation, turning away when he looked at me, walking away whenever he approached me. Why? Because he cared enough about my walk with Christ to point out that I was stumbling. My pride couldn’t handle it. Yet I could keep a very pleasant social demeanor, and hide my poisoned thoughts about this person. Shame on me.

There are people who stop coming to a church because someone, in a Spirit of love, tells them something that they don’t want to hear, something that offends, that repulses them. We need to take a lesson from Jesus here. Can we speak truth, in a spirit of love, without mincing words? Can we accept some of the harsh, challenging words that Jesus says without taking offense? Can we boldly yet humbly share our thoughts with one another with an intent to build this body we call the Church? Can we accept the fact that the truth we speak may be rejected leaving us rejected and hanging alone on a cross? Jesus didn’t seem too concerned about his own popularity. What he was ultimately concerned about was our eternal lives. That’s why he was willing to die alone and rejected on our behalf. That’s why he took upon himself the sins of the world, past, present and future, taking on death in order that we might live.

And to live we must eat his flesh and drink his blood; we must ingest Jesus, we must consume him in order that we may be consumed by him, so that we will sing when the Spirit says sing, and speak when the Spirit says speak, and not attempt to sugar-coat Truth. We either eat the flesh and drink the blood or we have no life within us. Some sitting in this church may be offended by such a statement, BUT JESUS SAID IT AND IT IS THE TRUTH.

So let us challenge one another in our faith. Let us first of all nurture our love for God and for one another, so that we may speak to each other bluntly yet lovingly, because unless we are bound to one another in love, we’re just a house of cards, a structure that will collapse when the slightest tremor of controversy arises. The Church is built on the firm foundation of Jesus Christ, and it will only stand on that foundation. A great building depends upon how well the structure holds *together,* how well one beam is attached to a wall, how strong the nails and bolt and rivets are that connect one structure to the next. How well are you connected to the other members of this church? Are there some who you avoid, who you are completely unattached to? Let us be bound together in a love that refuses to mince words but instead works to build the Church according to Jesus’ specifications.