

“Beginning with a Challenge”

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The First Congregational Church of Burlington, United Church of Christ
Burlington, Vermont

John 6:56 to 69

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.” ⁵⁹He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum.

⁶⁰When many of his disciples heard it, they said, “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?” ⁶¹But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, “Does this offend you? ⁶²Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? ⁶³It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. ⁶⁴But 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. ⁶⁵And he said, “For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father.” ⁶⁶Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. ⁶⁷So Jesus asked the twelve, “Do you also wish to go away?” ⁶⁸Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. ⁶⁹We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.

So how is it that we should begin? I would, of course, want to begin by thanking this church for the amazing opportunity to join Adrienne in serving as one of your pastors. I also want to begin by thanking God for the chance to work with the other amazing staff and laity who possess such depth and energy. I could begin by thanking God for a fairly easy move from Framingham to Burlington without too many hitches. Probably the biggest hitch involved going down to the Department of Motor Vehicles the other week to find that it was closed because of Bennington Battle Day. Go figure. But this minor inconvenience gave our family an excuse to go check out the Costco where a very kind saleswoman signed us up. We became members of Costco before we got our drivers licenses. I could also begin by thanking God for my nice house we are renting which has a pond in the back with two turtles, Lou and Lilly, and a belted King Fisher named Spike. Spike perches in the trees and keeps his eye out for the unsuspecting gold fish in the pond. Life is good although not always good for the goldfish.

But really, as we begin together, the best way to begin is with the word of God that offers us abundant life. One of the things you should know about me is that I like a challenge. I enjoy working with others on a challenge. When it comes to scripture, I enjoy the discipline of working with the lectionary where I encounter readings that I might not ordinarily pick if left to my own prejudices and devices. So what better way to begin our ministry together than with a very challenging and bizarre text from the Gospel of John to see how God might be speaking to us?

Jesus told his disciples that: “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.” But the disciples complained “Jesus this is so difficult. Who can accept it?” Indeed. For those hearing these words it might feel like Jesus is suggesting we become cannibals. That would probably be a fairly challenging and offensive way to begin our ministry with a conversation about cannibalism. But seriously, the disciples, deeply steeped in the Levitical codes of the Jewish tradition, had every reason to struggle. As devout Jews who were attendant to the rules in the seventeenth chapter of Leviticus verses 10 to 14, they took great offense at what Jesus had to say when they thought about these words:

If anyone of the house of Israel or of the aliens who reside among them eats any blood, I will set my face against that person who eats blood, and will cut that person off from the people. For the life of the flesh is in the blood; and I have given it to you for making atonement for your lives on the altar; for, as life, it is the blood that makes atonement. Therefore I have said to the people of Israel: No person among you shall eat blood, nor shall any alien who resides among you eat blood. And anyone of the people of Israel, or of the aliens who reside among them, who hunts down an animal or bird that may be eaten shall pour out its blood and cover it with earth. For the life of every creature—its blood is its life; therefore I have said to the people of Israel: You shall not eat the blood of any creature, for the life of every creature is its blood; whoever eats it shall be cut off.

The disciples who took this Levitical code seriously, would have been deeply offended by Jesus’ words that they should eat his flesh and drink his blood. According to Rick Morley, in an article entitled the “Bloody Truth”, “when Jesus said that in order to inherit eternal life you must drink his blood, he was using incendiary language that seemed to go against a millennium of biblical teaching. In other words, this teaching was like nails on a chalkboard for an ancient Jew.”¹ Of course, the disciples in an exasperated way, screamed “Jesus this is so difficult, who can accept it!” But while the disciples were so agonizingly focused on the offense of eating flesh and drinking blood, they neglected to probe the other parts of the very same text in Leviticus.

Again, paraphrasing Morely:

When animals were sacrificed to God in the rituals laid out in Leviticus various portions of the carcass were given back to the person making the offering. Or the carcass was given to the priests to consume. Still another possibility was to burn

the carcass on the Altar. In each case, the carcass is totally given over to God. But, the same thing always happened with the blood: The blood was always given to God. Usually it was poured onto the Altar directly. Why? Because God considered the blood holy. And God considered it holy because it was the blood of the animal that embodied its very life.²

Notice these words in Leviticus again. “For the life of the flesh is in the blood; and I have given it to you for making atonement for your lives on the altar; for, as life, it is the blood that makes atonement”. So when Jesus speaks of eating his flesh and drinking his blood he was really focusing more on the part of the Levitical code which invites us to participate in something holy. We participate in atonement or at-one-ment with God. Jesus was inviting the disciples to participate in the life of God through him.

As we abide in Jesus and share in his blood and flesh, he shows us a way to participate in that life of God. One of my favorite authors, John Westerhoff, tells us in his book, The Spiritual Life: Foundation for Preaching and Teaching, “the spiritual life, as I understand it, is ordinary, everyday life lived in an ever-deepening and loving relationship to God and therefore to one’s true or healthy self, all people, and the whole of creation.”³ Jesus, through his body and blood, invites us into that spiritual life where we participate in an unfolding divine mystery where the spirit is coursing through our bodies. In Christ, we are beacons to open our hearts and minds to see new possibilities and be drawn into deeper understanding of self and to other people.

As we all know, however, for so many of Jesus followers, Jesus does not open hearts and minds. He closes them. Jesus for many has become a rigid and authoritarian figure. He becomes the great dispenser of shreds of scripture pulled out of context, minute little rules which pass harsh judgment determining who is in and who is out. Who will get to heaven and who will not. Just as the disciples who were reading the Levitical code in just one way, we can take the words of Jesus so literally that we fail to consider Jesus might be saying something quite different. Through Jesus we discover eternal life. That could be interpreted as you will only get to heaven unless you profess Jesus’ name in a certain way. But it could also be interpreted to mean that through Christ we can discover the fullness of who God is in this life and not just the next.

Eternal life, if it is truly of God, should lead us to embrace human diversity instead of being hostile to it. Eating his flesh and drinking of his blood, is a metaphorical way to bring us life and help us grasp the essence of God. The flesh and blood, the humanity of our neighbor, is not something to be feared but it is in fact holy before a God who loves us so much. Jesus invites us to see God in our neighbor instead of looking at them with suspicion or scorn.

Seeing Jesus in a rigid way plays into our very human tendency to put ourselves and everyone else into categories. In our time, we engage in far too many verbal religious wars as we try to crush the opposition with our definitive take it or leave it interpretation of the text. And, in the political realm, there is one way to politically look at things—our way. We watch boutique news on our televisions that reinforces our well-travelled political and social views. The commentators invite us to look with scorn at those who might see it differently. Political

television ads turn the opposition into sub-human monsters portrayed through grainy and sinister looking photographs followed by pictures of the candidate in beautiful living color.

But Jesus is not here to reinforce our prejudices but to challenge them. In the Gospel of John, he invites us to first ask, “What is the Spirit that is moving through you? Is the spirit of Christ working on your heart? Might Jesus help you lighten up a little bit and get beyond what seems obvious to consider multi-dimensional possibilities?” Does Jesus contract your imagination or expand it? Does Jesus’ life-blood help you look more charitably on your neighbor who might not see things as you do? Jesus should be helping bring you to God instead of leaving you feeling cut off and spiritually dry. This inclusive teaching of Jesus is so difficult. It’s hard to understand. It’s sometime especially difficult for Jesus’ most devoted followers.

Alan Jones, the former Dean at Grace Cathedral in San Francisco once quipped: “I have some good news and some bad news. The good news is that God loves everybody and the bad news is that God loves everybody.” It’s challenging to love as God loves. But as we begin our life together in community and as we care for the people in this marvelous city in all of its diversity may the spirit of Christ work on hearts and course through our veins so that we can more clearly see the beauty, the humanity, and holiness of our brother and sister. Let us be patient with those who find it difficult to understand or look askance on Jesus because of their own wounds. And may we also be patient with our own selves as we seek to participate in an ever-deepening relationship with God and one another. Amen.

¹ “The Bloody Truth” by Rick Morely can be found at <http://www.rickmorley.com/archives/1880>.

² Ibid.

³ John Westerhoff, The Spiritual Life: Foundation for Preaching and Teaching, Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994, P. 1.

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