

Calvary Episcopal Church
Ashland, Kentucky
Sermon for August 25, 2012 ~ Proper 16B
The Reverend Ronald D. Pogue

Isn't it interesting how words and phrases have different meanings for different people? The Gospel of John is filled with examples of how Jesus' words meant different things to different people. Imagine a family reunion and people of several generations sitting around the table sharing a meal. One of the members of the family hasn't been with the rest since going away to the university last year. At some point in the conversation, he mentions some epiphany he's had in a course in psychology, philosophy, economics, literature, or political science. Grandma finds it scandalous and almost falls out of her chair. The little brother thinks it is about the funniest thing he's ever heard and wants to hear more. Dad is embarrassed. And cousin Irene thinks it is just about the most brilliant thing she's ever heard anyone say about the subject.

Jesus' words in his sermon preached in the Capernaum synagogue got a similar reaction and seem to have split his congregation. He said, "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me and I in them" (Jn. 6:56). The faithful Jews rejected his preaching because they were offended by his reference to eating and drinking human blood. Many of his disciples rejected his preaching for similar reasons. The idea of eating and drinking the flesh and blood of Jesus was almost impossible for the Jewish community to understand. In Hebrew, the phrase "to eat someone's flesh," meant to slander that person, and the law forbade the consumption of the blood of animals as food. Some of both parties rejected what he had to say because he refused to accept their definition of who he was. They found his words to be scandalous.

Some wanted him to be the one like Moses whom God had promised to send. They wanted him to be only a teacher and leader to whom they could take their complaints and shopping lists and who would perform signs and wonders for them. That just didn't go far enough for Jesus. He understood himself to be "the Word made flesh." Since the biblical expression "flesh and blood" stood for human life, this gospel is stressing that Jesus was asking them to receive his life. To eat his flesh and drink his blood is to be entirely receptive to him. Our daily experience of the connection between nourishment and life assists us in our understanding of the meaning of this passage. We have to eat to survive. But we have to eat the right things to thrive.

Jesus' words were difficult and scandalous. His words meant different things to different people then. They still do!

This passage extends to our experience of the Holy Eucharist, in which we gather weekly to eat Christ's body and drink Christ's blood. Eucharistic eating suggests an intimate connection between Christ and the Christian community. Food consumed and digested becomes part of the very fiber of one's existence. Reception of the Eucharist involves the communion of life in all its abundance, both now and hereafter.

The call of the Christian life, which is both signified and made real in the Eucharist, is to become new creatures, "other Christs." God took on flesh in Jesus so that we might take on the divine life in its fullness by our communion with him. The Eucharist is an invitation to enter into and share in the infinite love and generosity of the Creator and Sovereign of the universe.

We've been mourning the passing away of Neil Armstrong. One of the things for which he and his fellow astronaut, Buzz Aldrin, will always be remembered is that they shared the first Holy Communion on the moon on July 20, 1969. As Christians, these two men sensed the cosmic significance not only of their lunar landing, but also the Sacrament. There they were, farther from planet earth than any human being had ever

traveled, out in “the heavens”, and they stopped to feast upon the Body and Blood of the One by whom and for whom all of this was created.

Our creation in the image and likeness of God takes on concrete form in a life of generosity, praise, and thanksgiving. The celebration of Eucharist sacramentalizes this life, celebrating and nurturing the gratitude that is present in our daily lives. The Eucharist also reminds us to renew our resolve to think and act in ways that are compatible with the divine life we share.

This passage and much of the rest of John’s gospel deals with what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. Jesus is aware that not everyone who is invited will believe in him. He knows that even within his intimate circle of friends, some hesitate and stumble. But Jesus’ words reveal a message that will bring spirit and life to those who can hear it when they are ready to hear it. The author of John emphasizes that the ability to hear this message does not lie in our human strength but is above all a gift of the Spirit.

Communion of life with God is freely offered and must be freely accepted. There is nothing magical or automatic about God’s invitation to share in the Divine Life. Some choose freely to stay with Jesus; others find the message too scandalous and walk away from him, like those people in Capernaum.

While Jesus’ followers had to grapple with the mystery of this person in their midst who said he was from God, later Christians must struggle in a different way with the invitation to enter into a very personal, intimate relationship with God.

Our relationships with other people can help us understand why we too are tempted to walk away from the challenges of Jesus’ invitation. Years ago, a colleague of mine wrote a book about the relationship between Jesus and his disciples. In the introduction to the book, he recalled the words of a seminary professor: “We are not all of ourselves; our friends are the rest of us.” To become intimate friends with another person involves enormous joys and rewards but also great suffering and self-sacrifice. We are required to open ourselves up and become vulnerable, to die to certain aspects of ourselves in order to accommodate the other. And, wondrously, the more we become one with the other, the more we become who we are truly meant to be. How much more wonderful is the communion with the Creator of the Universe in unconditional love?

The greatest scandal of all in Jesus’ words is the scandal of grace. This Eucharistic banquet is his way of extending the scandal through time and space right into our own lives. Intimacy frightens us, sometimes offends us. Oneness with God may mean taking on and leaving behind. The status quo might change and we’d really sometimes prefer to have a Moses or a Solomon we could gripe to about how tough things are rather than a Savior who gives us grace that is sufficient for every experience life places in our path, so we can assume responsibility for our lives and experience true freedom. A Sacrament is God’s sacred pledge of the reliability of that grace, most perfectly expressed in the Word Made Flesh. When we receive Christ in the Eucharist, we are supposed to become a Sacrament wherever we may be. As the life of the Father is intertwined with the life of the Son, so Christ’s life is intertwined with our lives. When we eat his flesh and drink his blood, we consume the One whose unmerited love and favor consumes us and makes us new creatures.

So, he invites us today, with those same scandalous words. Under the signs of bread and wine he says to us, “Would you also like to go away?” And we may confess that, actually, we would. But even as we do, we consider the alternatives for self-salvation and we have to respond with Peter, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words that give eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God” (Jn. 6:69). As we come, we call out to him who is both the giver of the feast and the feast itself, “Come, Lord Jesus. Come quickly. Fill us with your life and give us the grace to share your life wherever we may be.”