

“Not What They Wanted To Hear” – John 6:56-69 – Aug 23/09

I noticed as I prepared for today's sermon that six years ago this Sunday I was involved in trying to help another congregation move back from the schoolyard scrap they were involved in. What seems more than ironic is that I have recently been invited to intervene again in a conflict in that same congregation! Yes, they're back at it again, and they are not alone. Most of us are familiar with the controversies that have boiled over in the Anglican church in the past several years. I saw in the paper the other day that the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the United States has just adopted a resolution to ordain clergy who are in a long-term monogamous same-sex relationship, and that will no doubt cause major ripples throughout their denomination.

But should you get the idea that the church is divided only on the big issues, let me assure you that people can and do get 'huffy' and chisel away at unity in the church over issues down to the teensiest, weensiest fragments! Thank God, and I do exactly that for this reason almost daily, that I don't run into that here at Central, but there are plenty of other places where controversy flourishes in the church!

Sadly this is not a new phenomenon, as we see in John's gospel. Jesus, following on the heels of his miraculous feeding of thousands with only scraps of bread and a couple of fish, goes on to tell his rapt followers how that phenomenal feeding was but merely a sign, an enacted symbol of who he is. He is, he tells them, the very bread of life, eternal life even, and that they are not only welcome but invited to find eternal life in eating the bread he offers, a bread so much more significant than even the manna from heaven that kept the Hebrews alive on the Exodus out of Egypt.

And the reaction to this divine pronouncement? "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?" Already, even before the church was founded, the complaining begins. That's the way John writes it in his gospel: "Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, 'Does this offend you?'" What an honest insight! Many Christians, perhaps most especially the most fervent Christians, seem to hold the view that Jesus' disciples sat all the time around his feet, beatific smiles pasted on their faces as they gazed with rapt eyes upon their Master and devoured with hungry ears every word from his lips. However the gospels open windows onto a story that is very different from that idyllic picture, and this text provides a glimpse through one of those windows. Here we have Jesus' close followers, not just the riffraff from some villages but people close enough to be called disciples, mumbling and grumbling and complaining about what he said.

Make no mistake ... these were not anti-religious people who were doing the complaining; this was no secular crowd thinking that this Jesus was some religious nut. The people who were doing the complaining were those who had come to church to hear him preach and teach in the synagogue in Capernaum. And it's not like he was a stranger to them, either. There are some very cogent arguments that can be made that Capernaum was really what would be called Jesus' home town, but even if that's not the case it is more than likely that he was well known in that particular synagogue.

In any event, it was the religious upright up-tights who were offended by Jesus' words. It was those who were comfortable in the church of his day taking offense at what he told them about himself.

So what exactly was it that offended them so much? What fire and brimstone did he spew at them to make them get all huffy? You would think for people to get upset with him that he would have to tell them that they were no good, that God didn't like or love them, that all of their efforts to please God had failed.

And in a sense that's exactly what Jesus did. With his description of himself as the bread of life, given by the Father, the bread that provided eternal life, Jesus offended them. By claiming not only to have the answers but to be the answer, he offended them terribly. And if that wasn't enough to get up their noses, Jesus went on to explicitly state that the miraculous manna provided to their

ancestors was next to useless compared to what he had to offer ... a clear proclamation that their faith was baseless, without foundation. And when he heard them complaining, he topped it off by asking them how they would handle seeing him ascend into heaven, as if he belonged there, just like a prophet pulling his chariot of fire into a heavenly garage in a celestial pearly-gated community.

Worse perhaps than even that, though, was Jesus' declaration that "no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father." Wait a minute, isn't that the opposite of what we thought he said? How many of you automatically hear that as "no one can come to the Father except through the Son?" But here, and it's repeated twice in this part of John's gospel, Jesus declares "no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father." Was Jesus claiming to be so special that God's permission was needed to get to him? Well, in a way he was, but it's more an issue of him declaring that God is the one clearly in control, that grace and salvation and forgiveness and life weren't automatically theirs but are gifts from God.

And what was the reaction of those close followers? They turned around and walked away! What he told them clearly wasn't what they wanted to hear. Many of them abandoned him, upset that Jesus had so blatantly challenged their belief in and about God. "What nonsense!", they must have muttered among themselves. "What blasphemy! How can he talk about himself in such a way?! Even if it were true, we know with certainty that God is not about bread and abundant and eternal life; God is about judgment and rules! Eat my flesh, indeed! Drink my blood! As if that's all it takes! Everyone knows you have to work hard, keep your nose clean, obey all the rules or else!" Those disciples who turned away from Jesus were terribly offended by his message, his promise, his declaration of God's grace at work in himself.

Can't you just hear them? Can't you just hear those disciples who turned away from Jesus mumble and grumble and complain that his message was 'too soft'? Well, if you can't hear them, just listen today. Listen to most of what's said on contemporary Christian radio and television. Read in the papers the foaming at the mouth with delicious anticipation about how God will 'get' (read 'zap with fire and sulfur!') those who endorse any theology other than theirs! No, you don't have to go very far to hear exactly the same kind of grumbling and complaining today that you would have heard from the former disciples of Jesus who turned back, and no longer went with him.

The great irony in this story is that the very grace that offended these disciples was provided for them by the same Jesus who offended them. Even for those who turned away, Jesus offered himself as the very definition of grace: God's gift of reconciliation, just because He desires his creatures, his people to be reconciled to him. No struggling toward an unreachable goal of perfection trying to earn God's forgiveness, but instead a forgiveness offered in his Son, Jesus, who did indeed ascend into heaven, sealing the promise and delivery of a bread of life truly imperishable. Not just to the eleven who stuck with him; not just to those who listened without grumbling and complaining in the synagogue; not just to those who try to live a modern day Christian version of Judaic Law; not just to the pure did God offer his forgiveness in Christ. Jesus brought grace and the promise of life to all who would accept that forgiveness in Christ's name.

And yes, God's grace is offensive. It's not fair. God's grace offends many even today, because that grace and forgiveness is not only reserved for those who have lived their life as perfectly as possible, but is also available for that person who comes to understand and believe at the last moment, just like the thief on the cross beside Jesus. Grace is not fair by our rules because even those latecomers also receive the promise "this day you shall join me in paradise". God's grace is offensively unfair, because it is not doled out in proportion to how hard we read scripture, how fervently we pray, how drug-free and sex-free our teenage kids are, how much we give to charity and/or to the church. God's forgiveness in Christ is as freely available to the casual believer as it is to

the devoted servant who toils endlessly, and that offends us. God's grace is measured out evenly to all, without a formula based on some human scale of repugnance of sins, and that offends many. God's forgiveness and mercy, his grace, is as freely available to the troubled soul who looks longingly at a crèche scene in a window on a stormy Christmas night as it is to the devoted Christian for whom the Christmas Eve service is the 58th service they've attended that year.

You might ask then why bother following the admonitions on how to live, or attend worship regularly, or volunteer, or donate to help refugees and the needy? If God's grace and forgiveness is readily available merely for believing in Christ, why do all the rest? To which the answer is fairly clear, at least to those who do try to live in ways that please God, and worship faithfully, and give freely of themselves in Christ's service – that it is in participating in all of these things as a response to what God has already done that the deep, satisfying, meaningful and abundant life Christ promised is actually found. This is the essence of what Jesus was saying to his disciples, that by immersing themselves totally in his ministry they would discover and avail themselves of the bread of life, that they would be filled and fulfilled in ways that were not possible any other way.

God's grace, God's mercy and forgiveness offered freely to all who would accept it in Christ's name, is offensive. It's not fair. And thank God that is the way it is, because otherwise that grace would not be available to the imperfect – to you, and to me. But that grace is available – to the devoted followers who today still ask the same question his disciples asked, "Lord, what other choice do we have – to whom else would we turn?"; available to those who offer themselves in service to Christ's call to feed the hungry, comfort the lonely; and available even if not especially to those troubled disciples who could not then, who cannot now follow him perfectly or even adequately. To all of them and to us, Christ has indeed come as the Bread of Life. "Those who eat my flesh and who drink my blood abide in me, and I in them", Jesus declared, opening the doors, unlocking the gates, removing the barriers to his table, upon which he has prepared a feast that offers eternal life. Taste and see, that our Lord Jesus Christ has fulfilled his promise to them, to us, to you, and to me.