

Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church

Sermon

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Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church
1225 Piper Boulevard, Naples, FL 34110

Flesh and Blood Faith

John 6:51-58

Sometimes Jesus said offensive things. That may surprise some people who of Jesus as meek and mild. But I think we can agree that “whoever eats me will live because of me,” is offensive. Surely our stomachs turn if we take his words literally. Eating someone’s flesh and drinking his blood is taboo except, I suppose, among cannibals. Add to the mix this linguistic twist and you really get turned off. The Greek word used here for eat is better translated gnaw, as if you were gnawing a bone. Jesus said that those who chew on his flesh, gnaw on it, cleaning the flesh off the bone like you might do with a Bar BQ rib, people who do that are really living.

Unless I miss my guess, some of you wish I had read a disclaimer like they do on television: the following may contain graphic imagery that some may find offensive. Well, maybe I should have warned you. This subject is not appetizing, not to our liking. No surprise there. The people who first heard Jesus say that were equally offended. John tells us that even the disciples complained. “This is a hard saying;” they objected, “who can listen to it?” Hearing that Jesus replied, “Do you take offense at this?” As if he didn’t know! You don’t talk like that without putting people off. No wonder many of his disciples no longer went about with him after that. No wonder Jesus asked the twelve, “Will you also go away?”

So why would Jesus say such a thing and how should we deal with it? Begin by considering the difference between a black tie dinner and a cookout. In both cases you get to eat. But at black tie dinners you’re more concerned with Miss Manners and eating properly. You would never just pick up a bone and gnaw on it. Don’t misunderstand, I don’t think Jesus wants us to live like uncivilized, ill mannered folk. I just think he’s inviting us to live freely, to live under grace, not law.

Consider the difference between a tourist and a missionary. The tourist travels through an area, observing, taking pictures, appreciating a country, no doubt. He may even learn the language and speak with the natives. But more likely he relies on an interpreter and never really connects with the culture. The missionary, on the other hand, moves into native housing, learns the language, gets involved with the people, even beginning to look like a native. There’s nothing wrong with being a tourist. I’m merely calling attention to the difference between one who travels through, observing, and one who truly mixes it up and gets involved.

Some Christians are like tourists. They’re just travelling through the faith, observing, appreciating, even studying, but staying somehow distant, aloof. I’m not saying they aren’t Christians. I’m merely calling attention to the difference between just traveling through and really diving in, immersing yourself in the faith, getting involved, rolling up your sleeves and mixing it up with Jesus. According to Jesus, those who gnaw on his flesh, really bite into him...those are the ones who are living eternal life.

Matt Fitzgerald, a United Church of Christ minister, wrote on this passage in a recent issue of The Christian Century. He noted that he had grown in a church with a rather sterile communion ritual, neatly cubed pieces of bread and silver cups of grape juice, but no striking focus on the flesh and blood of Jesus. “Then, he said, “I became a minister, and the first church I served celebrated communion at an altar rail...When I held out the loaf and the cup, the people tore large, ragged hunks off the bread and plunged them into the wine. I stood above them, embarrassed. I was ashamed of the smacking lips and the odd

rivulet of wine running down the side of someone's mouth...The entire enterprise was too intimate, too odd, too *fleshy*." He ended the meditation with these words: "Imagine what would happen if [Christ's] blood washed away all of your timidity, if you drank his love without reserve, if you left church with a piece of Jesus stuck between your teeth."¹

So what sticks in your teeth as you walk away from the table after chewing on Jesus? What impact do his teachings have on your life when you chew on them rather than simply let them go in one ear and out the other. I know, I just mixed my metaphors. But I think you get the point. When we chew on Jesus' flesh, when we take him seriously and drink his blood, something remarkable happens to us. We begin to live like Jesus such that people see Christ in us. "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them,"

No, I have no illusions of perfection, that you or I might actually measure up to Jesus. Indeed, I'm quite aware that none of us measures up. But the hope we have is that someday, by the grace of God we will measure up, not by our effort, but by the Spirit of God transforming us. Gnawing on Jesus' flesh, drinking his blood, we no longer worry about measuring up. We aren't afraid of what others think. We're too busy enjoying the meal, gnawing on the bone, serving God as Christ did.

When we take to heart the way he lived, we begin to embody his values, his way of relating to people. When we become like Jesus we no longer sit on the sidelines while people go hungry. We're no longer indifferent to their working or living conditions. We certainly can't be content with a health care industry that excludes some 46 million people and plays games with the rest of us whenever it suits their fancy.

When I first became your pastor, this church provided health insurance to staff members through the Principal Insurance Group. Here's what the Principal Group says on their website. "Experts in serving the insurance needs of individuals, business owners and their employees since 1879, we understand the importance of developing an insurance solution that's right for you." A few years ago they notified us, by form letter of course, that the company had decided to stop writing health insurance in Florida. So much for developing an insurance solution that was right for us.

A few years ago my wife had to change medications even though her doctor wanted her to stay on the one he prescribed. Why? Because the insurance company was more concerned about profits than it was the patient. My sister, who is a couple years younger than I, can't get health insurance. Why? She has asthma and had a diseased kidney and part of a lung surgically removed a few years ago. Other than that she's in pretty good shape. But the insurance companies are more concerned about their bottom line than they are about her health and well-being.

You and I might disagree about the details of health care reform. That's OK. I'm certainly no expert on that. We might have differing opinions about a public option or what should be covered and what should not. That's to be expected. But we cannot sit back and allow the lying devils that enrich themselves on the present system manipulate public opinion by spreading fear and disinformation. As your pastor, I have counseled several people on end of life matters. No, I am not a member of a death panel. Am I getting too specific? Am I starting to meddle? See what happens when you get Jesus stuck in your teeth?

In a recent newsletter, Jim Wallis, of Sojourners, wrote:

"It's time for the faith community to unite around the moral imperative of health-care reform..."

"It's time for the faith community to confront the distortions and lies that are being told. It's time for the ministry of "truth-telling" and to surround the nation's discussion of health care with fervent prayer.

¹ Matt Fitzgerald, *Living By The Word*, Sunday, August 16, *Christian Century*, August 11, 2009, 20.

“It’s time for the faith community to practice nonviolent tactics of reconciliation and resistance against those on either side who would threaten the public debate with intimidation, fear, and even the threat of violence.

“It’s time for the faith community to make its voice heard -- loud and clear.”²

Sometimes Jesus said offensive things like, “I 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.” Some might wish that Jesus had been meek and mild, not offending anyone. But those who gnaw on the flesh of Jesus, those who drink his blood, eventually become like him in every way. Jesus spoke truth to power. He challenged the society of his day. He ate and drank with sinners. He touched untouchables and healed them. He fed the hungry and had compassion on widows and orphans. And when the powerful silenced him, when they crucified him, God raised him up to live eternally. Now he embodies himself in people like you and me, people of flesh and blood faith.

When Jesus is stuck in our teeth, we get off the sidelines and into the fray.

² Jim Wallis, *People of Faith and Health-Care Reform*, SojoMail 08.13.09.