

Title: Your Response is Normal
Text: John 6: 56 – 69
Date: August 26, 2018

If you are like me, perhaps at times you have fantasized about living in Jesus' times, and hearing Jesus speak in person. Wouldn't that be wonderful? While you may have questions and uncertainties about your own faith and practice, you imagine that if you were only able to hear Jesus in person, there would be something mystical about that experience, and that you would instantly "get it." His words would transform. It would be like being caught in Star Trek's tractor beam, and you would be unavoidably drawn into all truth.

If any of us had ever had such daydreams, today's reading should be like a bucket of cold water thrown in our faces. Apparently hearing Jesus speak in person provides no such guarantee. While you may not have processed this with an initial quick read, if you were to take the time to read this slowly with a pen in hand, I think you would detect a multiplicity of responses. Jesus was wrapping up a profound teaching on offering himself, and the responses were all over the map. Perhaps all of this comes under the broad heading captured in v. 60: **"This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?"**

- There was complaining in verse 61: We read that Jesus was aware that the disciples were complaining.
- We read of disbelief in v. 64: Jesus said that he was aware that some did not believe, in this case having Judas in mind.
- There was outright rejection: In verse 66 we read, **"Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him."**
- We read of outright betrayal in verses 64 and 71.
- Of course all this is balanced out by Peter's profession of faith. We read: "So Jesus asked the twelve, **"Do you also wish to go away?"**
- Simon Peter answered him, **"Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."** (vv. 67 – 69)

I think that preacher's run the risk of identifying that last response – the profession of faith – as the "right" response. It is easy to come to that conclusion. I, however, would like to embrace *all* these responses as part of the range of normal, human responses. As I make my best efforts to present this person of Jesus to you today, there *should* be a range of responses, and that's OK. If there are not elements of complaining, and disbelief, and even rejection churning beneath the surface in the congregation today, then perhaps I have not painted a sufficiently audacious portrait of Jesus. Whatever your response is today – be it confused or convoluted – know that you are welcome, and you are in a safe place. Do you hear me? It is important to me that you believe that!

I mean seriously: When Jesus says, **"Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me"** (v. 56), if you are *not* instinctively grabbing for your air sickness bag, then perhaps you are not listening. Of course, some of you seasoned Christians are saying, "Just calm down. That's clearly a reference to The Lord's Supper." But really, there is no reference at all to The Lord's Supper in the gospel of John. None of the crowd gathered there would have any clue at all as to what you are talking about by referring to The Lord's Supper. On the surface, it rather sounds like cannibalism, and I might have been amongst those saying, "Seriously? Let me get back to my podcast on meditation now."

Some frame of reference might be helpful. In Bible study circles John 6: 22 – 59 is referred to as “The Bread of Life Discourse,” that was delivered in the synagogue at Capernaum. Our text this morning began at the very tail end of this discourse, and then concluded with reactions to it. So what did we miss by starting with v. 56?

We missed seeing that Jesus frames his discussion by reminding them of God who provided manna in the wilderness to their spiritual ancestors. As it is written, **“God gave them bread from heaven to eat.”** (v. 31) He then goes on to help them connect the dots by saying, **“Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is God who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.”** (vv. 32-33) Then the punchline: **“Jesus said to them, ‘I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.’”** (v. 35)

This, then, is what upset the crowd: Jesus describing himself as the bread of life which came down from heaven.

This comparison, however, is worth some more reflection. The manna that kept the people alive in the desert was something that appeared fresh every day, and had to be consumed anew each day. There was no such thing as “storing it up.” Likewise, if we think of Jesus as the bread of heaven, there is no such thing as storing him up. We have to make a daily decision to abide in Jesus – to walk in the way and the spirit of Jesus.

This thought makes me want to reflect anew on the menu of responses to Jesus that we surveyed earlier. We were inclined to review those options as a once and done decision. Am I in the “betrayal” camp? Heaven forbid. No, not me. So I must be in the “profession of faith” camp. That’s the way we would like to think. But if our thinking is informed by the “manna” comparison, maybe this is something that needs to be reflected on daily. Maybe one day I am in the “profession of faith” camp, and the next day I am in the “complaining” camp, and the next day I am in the “disbelief” camp. Does that make sense?

So which camp are you in today? Right now? If we are honest, many of us might be thinking, **“This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?”** And that’s OK. We like honest answers.

If we are honest, we might respond to many of Jesus’ teachings with, **“This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?”** For example this whole business of eating flesh and drinking blood sounds very . . . physical. Many of us gravitate towards being spiritual, and seem inclined to want to transcend this physical stuff.

Nadia Bolz-Weber writes that, **“We Christians have a long history of finding this idea [of spirit and flesh coming together] disturbing. There was an early Christian heresy called Docetism, and I’m not totally convinced that I myself would not have been a docetist given the opportunity. You see, docetists were so certain that spirit and flesh could not exist as one that they convinced themselves that Jesus didn’t really have a human body... it just seemed that he had a body. Docetists claimed that Jesus only appeared to be a physical being. And, I get the impulse behind docetism because, really, no self-respecting God would become a human when being human means being irretrievably fragile. What can it mean that God slipped into the vulnerability of skin and was made flesh? Seems a lousy idea in a way, given the very sloppy and broken reality of our physical lives as humans. Our bodies bruise and decay and sag insistently toward the earth, so why in the world would God not spare God’s self the indignity of having things like sweat glands and the hiccups?”**

“John’s gospel bears witness to a sensual God. Jesus washed human feet, smelled perfume, and tasted abundant wine. He used spit and dirt to heal a blind man, and his gut churned when he looked upon the hungry crowds. Salty tears ran down his face. He smelled the stink of death on Lazarus, his friend. Jesus’ very own flesh tore when he was beaten and crucified. When he rose from the dead, he told Thomas to touch his wounded side, which was not perfected, but bore the scars of having lived. Then as one of his final acts on earth, he ate grilled fish on a beach. These experiences of the body are not things to be spiritually transcended -- they are perhaps the very things in which we find Christ.”

If we can wrap our imaginations around this idea of spirit and flesh coming together, that changes things. That changes how we treat immigrants and refugees in our midst. That changes our response to those who willfully emit carcinogens and pulmonary irritants into our atmosphere. That changes how we respond to sex trafficking. *And* that changes how we feel about our own death.

Every day we need to decide how we are going to respond to these issues and others. Every day we need to decide how seriously we are going to take this business of abiding in Christ. Some days we might think that this is too hard. Some days we might just reject this notion of spirit infusing flesh. Some days we might just want to avoid the discussion altogether. And if this describes you on any given day, know that you are welcome here. As they say in AA, just keep coming back.

I pray, however, that there may be more days of clarity. More days when we hear Jesus ask, **“Do you also wish to go away?”** (v. 67) And more days when we respond by saying, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words that are eternally life-giving. We have come to believe and know your Way.”

Amen

John 6: 56 – 69

“Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. “Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. “This 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.” “He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum.

The Words of Eternal Life

“When many of his disciples heard it, they said, **“This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?** “But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, “Does this offend you? “Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? “It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. “But 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. “And he said, “For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father.”

“**Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him.** “So Jesus asked the twelve, “Do you also wish to go away?” “Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. “We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.”

