

14th Sunday after Pentecost B 25 August 2024

John 6:56-69

St Peter's Lutheran Church, Elizabeth

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Grace and peace to you from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

“But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about [his teaching], said to them, ‘Does this offend you?’” Let's pray: ...

Let's start there. Who's offended by today's gospel? Anyone? No-one?

When was the last time you were offended by Jesus? What did he say or do that caused you to falter and stumble? Which of his teachings has caused you to think, “I really struggle to follow this teaching?” When have you felt like just walking away from following Jesus because his teaching was more than you could tolerate?

I rarely hear Christians say that Jesus' teachings cause them to stumble or are offended by what he says and does. Why not? Why aren't we more offended by Jesus? Why aren't we stumbling and struggling to live the gospel more than we do?

The people in today's gospel are. Many of Jesus' disciples were grumbling and complaining to each other that his teaching was difficult and more than they could tolerate. “Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him.” They could no longer put up with what his gospel asked of them. The bread of life was more bitter than they'd anticipated.

And it's not just in today's gospel that this happens. Remember the rich man who went away grieving, shocked that Jesus told him to sell all of his possessions, give the money to the poor, then come and follow him (Mark 10:17-22)? Or the time Jesus returned to Nazareth and taught in the synagogue, “And they took offense at him” (Matthew 13:57; Mark 6:3).

In Luke's version of that story the people are so angry they want to throw Jesus off the cliff (Luke 4:29). Then there's the time Jesus called the Pharisees hypocrites and they were offended (Matthew 15:1-12). During the Passover meal Jesus told his disciples, "All of you will become indignant, shocked, offended, and made to stumble because of me during this night" (Matthew 26:31 my translation). And in the same chapter, we hear it in Peter's voice as he's told he will deny Jesus three times. But, what about us?

We don't want to be offended. It might reveal things we don't want to see or hear. I think most of us work pretty hard not to be offended by Jesus and his gospel. But what if we *should* be offended by Jesus?

Maybe we need to be offended by the gospel in order to fully grasp that the gospel is flesh and blood real. That's why the people in today's gospel are grumbling, complaining, taking offense. They know Jesus isn't simply talking about bread and wine. He's talking about a life that's flesh and blood real.

If the gospel isn't flesh and blood real it won't offend us or cause us to stumble and fall, because it doesn't demand anything from us. It's food out of a picnic basket but it's not the bread of life. It's some nice ideas about how to live, and some feel good verses to memorize; but, it's lifeless. It becomes what Dietrich Bonhoeffer calls, "cheap grace."

When the gospel gets flesh and blood real, that's when we get offended and angry. For example:

- No-one is offended when Jesus tells us to love our neighbour. Love is good news for everyone. It's not offensive until our neighbour is flesh and blood real – someone who looks, acts, and has different beliefs to us. Then it's a different story.
- Forgiveness is good. It's a part of every healthy relationship. I'm in favour of forgiveness... in theory. But forgiveness doesn't happen in theory. It happens in the flesh and blood reality of someone who hurts or betrays us, someone who shows no remorse, someone who may continue to hurt us. Whaaaaat!?! We have to forgive even them?

- Jesus said that whatever we do or do not do for the “least of these” we either do or don’t do for him. He gives several examples including one about welcoming strangers (Matthew 25:35/43). We’re to welcome the stranger as Jesus. Jesus is in every stranger, every needy person. That’s lovely isn’t it?... until it’s flesh and blood real; until the stranger is a migrant in our city, or on our property. Then what do we do?
- We love the cross of Jesus. We wear it, hang it on our walls, adore it. It reminds us of how much Jesus loves us. We follow his way of the cross. We know that means denying ourselves, taking up our cross, and following him. But what happens when we’re asked to give up our independence or change an aspect of our life for the well-being of someone else? That’s when the cross becomes flesh and blood real.

If loving, forgiving, welcoming, and taking up our cross don’t offend and challenge us, cause us to rethink the way we live, make us scrutinise and re-evaluate our beliefs and actions, then maybe the gospel just isn’t flesh and blood real for us. Maybe we’ve disembodied the gospel and separated the Word from everyday flesh. And if the gospel isn’t flesh and blood real, then what difference does it make?

I want us to live a gospel that’s flesh and blood real. I want us to be offended by it. I hope the gospel never loses its power to offend. And I hope you and I never lose our capacity to be offended.

What am I on about? Every time the gospel offends us, it means that we’ve bumped up against a limitation in our life. When the gospel is offensive, it’s showing us something about ourselves. It’s revealing the limits of our love, forgiveness, welcome; the limits of our justice, peacemaking, compassion; the limits of our life and humanity. And it’s pointing the way to new and more life.

What if we *should* be offended by Jesus and the gospel? What if our offense at the gospel isn’t a failure but an opportunity for “life and life abundant” (John 10:10)? What if what offends us is opening a door to new life, growth, and change? What if each obstruction we come up against isn’t the end of the line, but a starting line?

“Do you also wish to go away?” That’s the question Jesus asked the offended disciples. It’s the question we face every time we’re offended and bump up against our limitations. It’s the question we face every time the gospel challenges us, and asks more of us than we want to give.

I’m not trying to push you away or suggest you’re not a faithful Christian. Far from it. You’re in very good company. Mother Teresa struggled with the gospel’s flesh and blood reality too. She devoted her life to the most vulnerable; the unloved; the untouchable; the least of these, receiving the Nobel Peace prize in 1979 for her service. Yet, even she experienced “a dark night of the soul.” For decades, Mother Teresa felt empty and abandoned by God and felt like a hypocrite. She struggled with the discrepancy between her public life of faith and her private experience of doubt and spiritual loneliness. Deep poverty, disadvantage; the unfairness of it all, offended her. The flesh and blood reality of the gospel offended her.

Sometimes we say, “Yes, Lord.” Sometimes we turn our backs and defend ourselves rather than let ourselves be offended. Then there are the times when we trust that the very person or situation that offends us, also confronts us with, “the words of eternal life” ... Jesus.

Friends, allow Jesus to offend you. Accept his call to give all you can give of yourselves. Risk following him wherever he might lead you. Love your unlovable neighbour. Forgive those you struggle to forgive. Welcome the stranger regardless of how strange they might be. And cling desperately to the cross, no matter how many splinters get stuck in your hands. When you do so, Jesus will become real; flesh and blood real to you, and you’ll come face to face with the Holy One of God whose grace is priceless. Saints, be offended and be blessed, for the sake of the gospel of God’s saving love in Jesus Christ and his glorious kingdom. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds safe in Christ Jesus. Amen.