

Title: When Jesus Offends
Text: John 6:60-69
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Immanuel Baptist Church
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I think there a number of people who imagine Jesus as a huge success. Certainly Jesus attracted crowds. He healed people and that drew a crowd. Some were drawn to his teaching. But here Jesus says some things that results in a loss of many of his followers.

I think what is difficult about this passage is that Jesus is not surprised by the loss. Actually, it reads as if he planned it. This is hard for those of us who buy into the notion that success must inevitably move us toward the bigger and better. As Americans we are so oriented toward growth and expansion that it's hard for us to imagine Jesus teaching in such a way where his intent is to sift and filter out people.

From the beginning of this story the writer has tried to capture the spiritual blindness and growing antagonism of the crowd toward Jesus. Jesus refuses to be king on their terms and from that point there is a growing dislike for the things Jesus is saying.

And now we learn that the same holds true for many of Jesus' disciples. The focus not turns away from the crowd toward the disciples of Jesus who can't take Jesus' teaching any longer.

After hearing Jesus' claim to be the bread from heaven and his teaching about eating his flesh and drinking his blood John says, "many of his disciples said, 'This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?'" And they started "grumbling", a word that recalls the grumbling of Israel in the wilderness when they became weary of the manna God gave them to sustain them in the desert.

Jesus responds: "Does this offend you? Then what if you see the Son of Man ascend to where he was before!" The mention of ascending implies descending and the ultimate act of descension was the crucifixion. This is a key theme in Gospel of John. The Son of Man descends and then ascends, he is crucified and then he is raised up and vindicated. The meaning seems to be something like: Are you offended by my teaching? What if you could see the real significance of what I am doing and how the Spirit of God is work in me? Would you still be offended?

Next Jesus says: "The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you—they are full of the Spirit and life. Yet there are some of you who do not believe."

Here there is a play on the word “flesh.” In keeping with John’s tendencies to give words multiple meanings this word has three different significations in this passage. Earlier Jesus said, “This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.” There “flesh” represents the total life of Jesus given for the world, a self-giving that would end in death. Next, Jesus talks about eating his flesh and drinking his blood and he says that his flesh is real food his blood real drink. There Jesus is speaking figuratively and poetically about sharing in his life and mission and about abiding in him spiritually. (There may be an intended reference to the Communion meal symbolic of this indwelling.) But here when Jesus says that “the flesh counts for nothing” he is not talking about his life that is given up in death, nor is he talking about abiding in him in a spiritual way; rather, he is using the word in a negative sense, much the way Paul used it when he wrote about the struggle between the flesh and the Spirit. Here he refers to that life force in humanity that is opposed to the will of God.

The Spirit of God bestows life—that is, real life, eternal life, life in relationship with God, life empowered and saturated with God’s love. The flesh resists and opposes this kind of life—life lived with and for God, life expressed and incarnated in Jesus.

Jesus seems to be saying that those who are offended at him are giving in to the flesh—this principle at work in humanity resists God and that caters to the ego. The disciples who are offended at Jesus do not believe that Jesus is the bread of life, that is, that his words and his friendship can sustain them and nurture them and guide them through the wilderness of life.

What do we believe today? Much, I think, has to do with our assumptions about Jesus and what we expect of Jesus.

Fred Craddock was for a brief time dean at Phillips Seminary. While acting as dean a woman from the community came to see him. She asked him to come out to the parking lot. This made him a little nervous, but he went. She opened the back door of her automobile, and slumped in the back seat was her brother. He had been a senior at the University of Oklahoma, but had been in a bad car wreck and was in a coma for eight months. She had quit her job as a schoolteacher to take care of him. All of their resources were exhausted. She opened the door and said, “I would like for you to heal him.”

Dr. Craddock responded: “I can pray for him. And I can pray with you. But I do not have the gift of healing.” She got behind the wheel and said to him, “Then what in the world do you do? And she drove off. Maybe she left the faith altogether when she drove off. Who knows? But she came with certain assumptions didn’t she?”

Maybe this is why some people quit following Jesus. Maybe it’s because they come to realize that their assumptions about Jesus are not working out and they don’t like what

they are see or hear. These disciples found Jesus' words to be a "hard teaching"—not in the sense that it was difficult to understand, but in the sense that they were offended by it and couldn't accept it.

Was it lack of commitment? Yes and No. I remember seeing in a Christian Leadership journal a cartoon that had a picture of a church. In front of the church was a billboard and the sign on the billboard read: The Lite Church—24 percent fewer commitments; home of the 7 and ½ percent tithe; the 15 minute sermon, the 45 minute worship service, 8 commandments (your choice); everything you wanted in a church and less." It was lack of commitment, but it had more to do, I think, with Jesus not conforming to their expectations. If we really believe in something, we are usually able to commit to it. But here Jesus is not turning out to be the Messiah they wanted or expected.

This happens today. We come to Jesus for reasons that are not quite adequate. We come because we are afraid that if we don't God is going to "get us"—that God will condemn us or cast us away forever. So we come out of fear, but then we come to realize that what Jesus really wants is not for us to be afraid of God, but to love God. And we learn that in order to love God we have to love others and that means caring for others and giving to others and listening to others and standing up for those who may not be able to stand up for themselves—and well, that takes an awful lot of work and sacrifice of our own self-interests. So then we have to decide if we still want to follow Jesus.

Or maybe we come to Jesus expecting to be healed—after all, Jesus was and is a healer. He specializes in healing the pain and brokenness of the human condition. And so we come to Jesus out of our emptiness and brokenness expecting Jesus to fill the void and heal our wounded souls. And maybe we experience healing in a profound way. But then we realize that the only way to stay healed is to love others. We realize that it's not all about our needs, it's about the needs of others and it's about learning how to love—even those who are difficult to love, even those who may wish our harm.

We discover, too, that following Jesus does not solve all our problems. That following Jesus creates as many problems as it solves.

In other words, when we discover that Jesus is not just there to cater to our needs, but to enlist us in a cause that is greater than our selves, a mission to bring justice and peace to the world, then we have to decide if that is what we want to do. When we realize that Jesus is here not simply to give us the bread from heaven, but to fill us with his grace and truth so that we can give bread to others, then we have to decide if we want to continue following Jesus.

There is a lot of Christianity in our world that is about a mile long and about an inch deep. There is nothing really to it. It doesn't challenge us to incarnate the love and grace and

truth of Jesus. It doesn't demand that we die to our ego-centeredness. For the most part it asks us to believe certain doctrines and conform to certain general expectations that have come to prevail in our culture. But Jesus asks us to die to our self and follow him all the way to the cross.

I heard about a little girl who was present one day when all the Christian ministers of their denomination had gathered at their church for a special meeting. She noticed that there were no women in the group. She asked her mother about it and her mother simply said without any explanation, "We don't have women pastors in our church." The little girl asked, "Then why do we go there?"

Maybe the disciples here in our story asked a similar question when they realized that Jesus was not who they wanted him to be. If Jesus is not the Savior we want, if he is not going to give us what we think we need, if he is not going to conform to our expectations, then why should we keep on following? And so they quit. They defected. John says, "From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him." Jesus then turns to the twelve (though John informs us that one of the twelve would betray and desert Jesus): "You do not want to leave too, do you?"

Peter, as the spokesperson of the group responds (by the way this corresponds to Peter's confession in the Synoptic Gospels): "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God." They say, "You have the words of life. Words that are Spirit drenched, words that lead to an authentic human existence.

Do we believe that Jesus is the Bread from heaven that gives real life, true life, authentic life? Do we trust with all our hearts that Jesus is the embodiment of God's grace and truth, the incarnation of life as God intended it to be lived?

I don't care what a person believes in terms of the preexistence of Christ or what kind of doctrinal formulation about Christ a person subscribes to. None of that really matters. What matters, when it comes to Jesus, is whether or not we believe that Jesus has the words of life and can lead us find our place and purpose in God's kingdom.

Are we convinced enough to follow Jesus even if it leads to the cross? Even if it means learning new ways of relating and being in the world; even if it means letting go of control and greed and pride and our own personal agenda? Are we convinced that the words and self-giving of Jesus lead to eternal life, an authentic human life as God designed it? If we do believe, then there is no where else to go.

Gracious Lord,

Give us the courage to follow Jesus wherever that takes us. Give us the courage to face our misdirected assumptions and ideas about Jesus—about who he is and what he is about.

Give us the courage to be challenged and changed by Jesus' life and words. Give us the kind of risky faith that is willing to turn our lives over to his purpose and cause in the world. Amen.