

August 22, 2021

“Cannibals for Christ”

Today’s sermon title is, of course, too easily misunderstood. It helps if you have known me awhile and heard me say things like, “Larceny for the Lord.” Or “Swindling for the Savior.” All said tongue in cheek of course. These turns of phrase resting on alliteration are too easily misunderstood. I would be shocked if this were not the first sermon you have ever heard entitled, “Cannibals for Christ.”

You know in your heart of hearts that we will never encourage you in the name of God who loves us to become cannibals. However, **did you know there were times in the life of the early church that they were accused of this crime exactly?** *“Don’t become a Christian.”* Some said to their friends, *“They practice cannibalism.”* And, their friends added - *“they kill their children.”* Why would they think that? Some of you here have presented your children for the sacrament of baptism - have you not? We believe in Baptism we die to sin and are raised to new life with Christ. In the rumor mill this became infanticide. And when we celebrate the Lord’s supper - we might say, *“This is the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ.”* *Once upon a time, the mother of a four year old who had not gone to children’s church during communion told me, “When you said, ‘this is the blood of Christ,’ my daughter elbowed me and said, “Mom - that’s somebody’s blood up there. I’m not taking that, no way, and you shouldn’t either.”*

Abstract reasoning in a concrete mind is confusing. Especially if you only get part of the message - or if you only hear things second hand - it becomes hard to sort out what is real from something someone just said.

Jesus makes it hard on his disciples today because he takes from his faith tradition - **the sacrifice of animals in the temple - animals who were the food for priests** - and weaves that practice into his life and ministry. How can one even read the story in today’s gospel reading and not find it upsetting. *“Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.”* What on

earth were the disciples supposed to do with that?

This is a cautionary tale to be careful when we believe that the most important stuff is always literal. We can, of course, imagine that Jesus is talking about communion - at our stage of the game that makes sense. But in this conversation Jesus is not so gently moving his disciples **beyond simple literal interpretation.** Jesus says - as people are reeling from his words - *“It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless.”* He doesn’t leave us a lot of room here to hold on to a literal reference. And those following him who could only manage literal concrete references left him. He was never going to be the kind of Messiah they wanted. **A Messiah whose glory was seen fully in the here and now.**

Jesus has just avoided having the crowd take him by force to make him king. This is what we do when we redirect children who are focused on something harmful. Redirect. As your child is reaching for the sharp knife on the table you point down at your plate and ask, *“Is that a picture of cookie monster on my plate?”* The child looks to the plate and the knife is removed while they aren’t looking. No power struggle over a sharp knife - too dangerous - redirect instead. No fight over becoming king - redirect people to the nature of your life and ministry instead - *and do so in a way that challenges them.* **“Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.”**

Many of Jesus followers said, “This is too hard.” And when we push up against the things God is calling us to which are unfamiliar and feel foreign, we say the same thing. “This is too hard.” **But it was only too hard for the disciples and it is only too hard for us because of the limits of our thinking - and the difficulty we have seeing things from a spiritual perspective as we live life.**

When you listen to people who fix things by taking parts from older items of the things being fixed....cars, computers, mechanical processes of all kinds - **I have heard them say they “Cannibalized” the old computer, car or thing** - to get the parts needed to make the newer one run. Jesus does this

today with the sacrifices in the temple, and we are called to do this in our lives as well. *To take the heritage of the faith - weave it in to the lives we live each day - and find the spiritual reality for living life.*

In this sense, we are called to be cannibals for Christ. *To weave the spiritual teachings of Jesus into the very modern world in which we live. To deflect simple materialistic interpretations of life and engage the spiritual reality of the risen Christ which energizes our life each day.*

For those of you who find this image so awful and repugnant - that even with re-interpretation it makes you queezy and you don't want to deal with it - remember - you are not alone. The early disciples didn't really care for it either - but when push came to shove and Jesus told them they could leave if they wanted to they replied, *"Lord, to whom would we go? You have the words of eternal life - and we have believed and come to know that you are the Christ."*

Increasingly in our culture faith is misunderstood. Sometimes Jesus is hard to understand. Sometimes we don't get it. **But Jesus has what we need.** So we keep at it. Working away on taking the things we've learned - the faith we've been given and the tool box of our spiritual lives and our sanctified common sense - and making a life out of it. There isn't anywhere else to go. *So even when its weird - there is life to be found living life with the risen Lord. Even when it means being "Cannibals for Christ."*