

“The Gift of the Hard Teaching”

Psalm 84; John 6:47-71 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn

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Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words that we might be nourished by the bread of heaven and give our hearts to your Christ, in whose name we pray, Amen.

We’ve been working our way through John 6 all month, and here we are again, back at the part we might prefer to avoid. The translators of the New Revised Standard version have the disciples calling Jesus’ monologue here “difficult.” I believe the word I used three weeks ago was “squicky,” which feels more accurate to me, but I guess not everyone is as squeamish as I am.

Before we get too far into things here, I need to tell you about my nephew’s visit last weekend. He’s a fifteen-year-old boy who likes being up high, so we had decided we would visit the California Tower. In case you’re not familiar, that’s the tower above the Museum of Us at Balboa Park. Tours are scheduled throughout the day to go up the 125 steps to the viewing deck on the eighth floor. But in order to get a ticket to go up the tower, you also have to get a ticket to the Museum of Us itself. So we did that. It’s a pretty good deal really; one ticket gets you a year-long membership. We had arranged our afternoon so that we could look around the museum before our tour, to make sure we weren’t late. The museum itself isn’t that big, so they often have a special exhibit in the building across the street. And as it turns out, the special exhibit that’s currently on display is all about cannibalism.

I am confident you will forgive me for not being able to report on this exhibit in detail, as I was distracted by keeping track of the time and, honestly, a little trepidatious about what I might not be able to unsee if I got too far into the fine print. But here is an important trend I noticed: much of the material covered history from what may have been called the “Age of Exploration” when you were in school. And far more common than Western explorers finding actual evidence of indigenous tribes consuming human flesh were reports that it seemed like they probably did. It turns out that accusing a population of being man-eaters was a sure-fire way to justify enslaving them and taking their land. Imperialism 101: Bringing up cannibalism is the quickest pathway to de-humanization.

But you already knew that, didn't you? We know that in our gut, without even having to be told. Consuming human flesh is the ultimate taboo, the thing that immediately proves definitive otherness. But Jesus took it even one step further, didn't he? Because if there's anything we hate more than the idea of someone eating human flesh, it's the idea of being eaten ourselves. In a world of “eat or be eaten,” being eaten means you are the loser, and we might hate losing even more than we hate talking about blood and guts and other squicky things.

But here is this person, rumored to be the Son of God – the ultimate winner, one might think – and he's not only talking about eating flesh and drinking blood, but offering himself up as the meal. What is going on here? Is this teaching difficult because it hints at cannibalism or because it points to a level of sacrificial love that we

can barely handle? Who's interested in a Savior who's the Biggest Loser? How does he manage to sound so arrogant and so selfless all at the same time? Why bother coming down from heaven if you're just going to give yourself away when you get here? It's no wonder so many people went home. "I thought this guy was the real deal, but he's just not making any sense at all." "He wants us to do what?!" "He's gonna get us all killed."

This might be a good moment to remind us that John's gospel does not include a narrative of the Last Supper. Instead, John 13 offers us the story of Jesus washing the disciples' feet. But one could never argue that John didn't offer us any eucharistic theology! This chapter started with Jesus taking and blessing and breaking the bread and feeding the 5000 with it. And now he's telling us just what that bread can do and what it represents. And even though he's talking about his own flesh and blood, we know that if we want to claim to be disciples, to be followers, similar kinds of sacrifice may be asked of us one day as well. In chapter 15, Jesus will say "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." Is it the flesh and blood talk or the injunction to sacrifice that is so hard? Is Jesus using the flesh and blood talk to help us understand just how shocking the sacrifice may be? He knows that we hear "eternal life" and immediately think "Victory!" But what he wants us to understand is that the forces of death are not something we conquer by force, but something that can only be undermined by the power of sacrificial love. Over and over again he says this: "those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it." This is a difficult teaching.

Sometimes I wonder if the difficult teachings in the gospel are easier to dismiss because our lives are actually too easy. Unlike Jesus' original audiences, we do not live under a violent occupation. Our refrigerators are full of food, and when they're not, there are drive-thrus and grocery stores on every corner. We have access to toothpaste and pain meds and good shoes. Sometimes it takes a case of extreme deprivation to make us realize how deeply the sacrifices of Jesus can be embedded in our hearts.

One of the most striking parts of the cannibalism exhibit at the Museum of Us was a ten-minute video about "the Tragedy of the Andes" or "the Miracle of the Andes," depending on how you want to look at it. Many of you will remember when a plane crashed high in the Andes Mountains in October of 1972¹. It was carrying primarily a Uruguayan rugby team and their family members, on the way to a tournament in Santiago, Chile. The main reason for the crash was that the pilot was confused about where they were because of cloud cover, and that also meant that their final radio communications had given inaccurate information about where they crashed. That confusion combined with a white plane camouflaged in the snow meant that the search and rescue efforts failed.

The survivors had to do whatever they could to survive. And eventually, that meant subsisting on the sun-dried flesh of their fallen compatriots. The mental and emotional agonizing they went through as they gradually made the decision to do so is poignant and telling. They were mostly all faithful Catholics. They had grown up with

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Uruguayan_Air_Force_Flight_571

the words “This is my body, for you” engraved on their hearts. Though they couldn’t have the conversation with their companions who had died in the crash, among those who were still living, they solemnly gave permission for their own bodies to be used for sustenance if they were to die, which some of them later did, in an avalanche. They actually brought up how this extreme act that they were forced into for their own survival was similar to communion, and for some of them, that was the only way they could bring themselves to partake. It’s hard to imagine how they might have made sense of that if they weren’t part of a faith tradition that upholds sacrificial love as the highest value. This isn’t normally how “laying down our lives for our friends” plays out, but it’s one example of just how far this difficult teaching can take us.

Now, I trust that none of you are getting on a plane flight over the Andes anytime soon. I hope that none of us will be faced with such impossible choices. But perhaps the extremity of that situation helps us understand why Jesus seems to be going for shock value in this discourse he’s having after having fed 5000 people and getting flack for it. This weekend at our leadership retreat, we talked about all the things we do in church and in our lives that show how we love God with our hearts and our souls and our strength and our minds. The psalmist says “My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God.” It’s been clear all along that our whole selves are invited into this journey of following Jesus, the one that nobody promised would be easy. But “to whom would we go,” we might ask, along with Peter.

We have seen what the opposite of sacrificial love can do: the destruction wrought by unmitigated greed and selfishness, the damage caused by prejudice, the death brought about by regimes that pretend they can find security through violence. We have given in often to the temptation of delivering ourselves from evil, trying every other way we could think of, because the way Jesus offers us seems too scary. But here we are and here is Jesus, offering us the words of eternal life. “This bread is my body, broken for you. This cup is my blood, shed for you.”

Where would we go? In just a bit, as we conclude the service, we will sing “I will give my life for them. Whom shall I send?” Will we go? Are we still here, by Jesus’ side, willing to face every difficult teaching, even the ones that make our stomachs queasy? We have been given bread for the journey, if we are willing to share in it. Let us gather together the courage of our hearts and follow. Hallelujah and Amen.