

### ***Taking Offense***

In the name of him who has the Words of eternal life, dear friends in Christ: I'm willing to wager that most everyone here knows at least one person who is just plain rude. I'm talking about the kind of person who just seems bent on belittling your existence. They never have a kind word for you—only insults. They sharp shoot everything you say and criticize everything you do. There's just no pleasing them. A show of hands, here: how many of you know someone like that?

The reason I mention it is that in today's Gospel reading, Jesus seems to be going out of his way to be someone a lot like that. He's deliberately saying things to a group of people that he knows is going to offend them and make them angry and even disgusted with him. And perhaps it's a bit unsettling for us to see Jesus behave this way. We expect him to be nicer and more friendly – far more welcoming. But that's sure not what we heard; which forces us to ask the question: Why would he do this? Why is Jesus being so offensive?

To understand the answer, we need to back up a bit. This episode takes place the day after Jesus fed five thousand people by miraculously multiplying the meager contents of a young boy's lunch. That happened at a remote, uninhabited place on the northeast shore of the Sea of Galilee. It really made an impression on the crowd, too. They thought they'd hit the jackpot. Here was a guy who could provide for all their worldly needs even in the middle of the wilderness. They figured they'd never have to work again. As an added bonus, he could heal them when they got sick. Jesus seemed to be the answer to all of their prayers – which is true; but not in the way they were thinking. In any case, the upshot was that they were willing to pledge him their undying devotion as long as he would continue to feed and take care of them. Their plan was to make him their king, which they hoped he'd agree to; but they were prepared to force him into the role if necessary.

Well, it was late in the day. Just before sunset, Jesus sent his disciples by boat back across the lake to Capernaum. Meanwhile he himself stayed behind and went up on a mountain alone to pray. The crowd watched all this. They camped out over night near the shore. Their plan was to catch Jesus when he came back down the mountain—which they hoped would be just in time for breakfast. Then they would declare him their king and he could again whip up for them something to eat.

Much to their disappointment, it didn't happen that way. Instead, after praying for several hours, Jesus went after his disciples by walking out to them on the surface of the lake; but he did it under the cover of darkness while the crowd was sleeping contentedly (and, no doubt, dreaming about what life was going to be like without having to work for food anymore). So they didn't know that Jesus had left the area. At sunrise they assembled and waited for him to appear. I don't know how long they waited; but at length they figured out that Jesus was gone. Knowing that Capernaum was the home base of his Galilean ministry, they went back there to hoping to find him. And sure enough, they caught up with Jesus as he was teaching at the local synagogue.

What follows is a rather lengthy exchange between Jesus and the now empty-bellied crowd. They're hungry and they want Jesus to feed them again. It's all they can think about. Jesus repeatedly tells them they're after him for the wrong things. He keeps trying to steer them

away from their fixation on the temporal needs of the flesh to more spiritual and eternal matters. He tells them he has real bread – the Bread of Life – which if a person eats he will live forever. *That's* what they ought to be seeking from him. The miracle he performed was merely an illustration of this greater reality. He was showing them that *in him* God's Word becomes a never-ending source of sustenance for the sin-sick and starving soul.

But they don't get it. In fact, they stubbornly refuse to get it. From their point of view, they were basically good people. And so they consider their spiritual needs to be minimal, at best. What they really needed, or so they thought, were the things necessary for *this* life: the basics of food, clothing, and shelter. Jesus sees things differently. He knows their real needs. He knows that they're rotten, rebellious sinners whose minds are so dark and corrupt that they are unable to identify their most important needs. And so as the conversation unfolds, Jesus uses increasingly sharp language and harsh terms to shock them out of their spiritual complacency. He takes the offense by speaking to them offensively – that is, in ways he knows will offend them.

And that's what we heard this morning: the conclusion of this increasingly heated exchange. He tells them that the Bread of Life he's been talking about is his own flesh. He says that unless they eat his flesh and drink his blood they have no life in them at all—not now in the present, or later in eternity. And to heighten the impact of what he's saying, when he speaks of eating his flesh, he doesn't use the usual polite word for dining; but one that's substantially more graphic. It's a word that means to gnaw and tear meat noisily like a pack of hyenas ripping into an animal carcass. So it sounds to them like he's speaking of the most savage form of cannibalism, which you've got to admit ought to send shivers through the sensibilities of any civilized person. It would have been even worse for these folks because being Jews they were strictly forbidden to drink the blood of any creature; and here Jesus tells them to have life, that's what they have to do – drink his blood. So his words are repugnant to them on several levels: culturally, aesthetically, and morally. It grossed them out – so much so that the vast majority of them walked away in disgust. They refused to hear anymore. Most of those who belonged to his wider circle of disciples couldn't take it either. They too left Jesus. And even the twelve – those men handpicked by Jesus – really struggled with it. They grumbled among themselves about what he'd said.

So Jesus turns to them as says, "What about you guys? Are you also offended? Are you going to leave me too?" It's Peter who replies for the group. "Lord, to whom shall we go? *You* have the Words of eternal life." And what Peter is saying is that though the words of Jesus are often hard and offensive – especially to the ears of sinners like us – they are nevertheless true words. They are words that can be trusted. And they are words that communicate the forgiveness of sin and eternal life to those who trust in them.

And it's important for us to understand that behind these offensive words of Jesus are greater offenses still. The first is what we call the scandal of the cross. That's really what Jesus is talking about here: the truth that he came into this world to offer himself as the sacrifice of atonement for the sins of all people. He's talking about how we live directly from his death and *only* on account of his death. And if talk of cannibalism is upsetting, the scandal of the cross is even worse. Why? Because most people in a desperate life or death situation such as the one faced by the Donner party or that plane load of Argentine soccer players that crashed in the Andes several decades back – most folks would reluctantly resort to cannibalism to survive. Desperate situations call for desperate measures.

And that's the point. Because far more desperate a situation is our standing before the Lord God. In his sight we stand condemned on account of our sins and deserve an eternity of suffering in hell. There is no goodness in us, none whatsoever. And nothing we can do can change it. In fact, when we try to do something we think ought to please God, or when we imagine that on the whole we're pretty good people, we only compound our guilt by calling God a liar and denying the true nature of our situation. And this is why Jesus speaks to his disciples in offensive terms. *We need to be offended.* That prideful old nature in us that insists there really is something about us that's good and worthy and lovable needs to hear the ugly truth as disturbing as it is. We need to be humbled and brought down – not just a few notches – but all the way down to utterly despairing of ourselves. We need to be able to say with St. Paul, "I know that in me, that is, in my flesh, dwells no good thing." Then we'll understand what Jesus means when he says, "Your flesh avails nothing. The words I speak to you are spirit and life." It's by trusting the words of Jesus, and it's by feeding on his death on the cross – his body broken and his blood shed – that we live. There is no other way to live.

And that is the second offense: the exclusivity of the cross, the truth that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is not one option among many, but it's the *only* way to life and salvation. In our prideful blindness, in our desire to fill the role of God, we would like to dictate to him how things should be. It's unfair, we think, that the Lord would only provide one means of salvation to the world. Surely, there must be other paths up the mountain. The good Hindu, the good Muslim, the good – the good whatever as long as they are faithful and trying to do their best according to their understanding, God wouldn't reject them, would he? But you see, this is the same error: there are none good, no, not one. All are condemned as sinners. All deserve to be cast into hell. But God, rich in mercy, has made atonement for the sins of all in his Son. And sinners are declared righteous in his sight through faith in his Son, his Son who is alone the way, the truth, and the life. Rather than complain that there aren't more paths to salvation, we should be thankful that God has made a way at all – and what a gracious and loving way it is.

Of course, as Lutheran Christians, this should be pretty elementary stuff to us. Sure, we need to keep hearing it because it's easy even for us to get wrapped up in temporal matters and lose track of our more important spiritual needs, or to slip into the false mode of thinking that says, "I do my part and Jesus does his, and working together I'll end up in the right place when I die." Still, I deal with this so often in my work that it's easy for me to forget sometimes just how much trouble people have with it. For instance, I spoke with a woman some time back – someone I deal with regularly because of her job. She knows I'm a pastor and when we're doing business she'll sometimes ask me questions about spiritual matters. From what I've gathered, she considers herself a Christian; though, near as I can tell, she's not active in any church. (Yes, I've invited her to come here; but so far ...) Anyway, she had recently attended the funeral of a man who was definitely not a Christian and never made any pretense about it. She told me what a nice service it was – how everyone had said such wonderful things about him. And then she said that even though he wasn't a religious man, she was certain that the Lord would never send such a good person as him to hell. She looked at me as if expecting me to agree. When I didn't say anything right away, she asked what I thought. I said, "I think hell is going to be full of very good people."

The comment about knocked her over. She said, "What do you mean?" I said, "We keep track of which people we think are good or bad. But from God's perspective, there is no one who is good. All have sinned and are disqualified from gaining heaven. All people deserve to be sent to hell forever. It's only by trusting in Christ – in his perfect obedience and his death for sin that saves. It isn't being *relatively* good that matters – it's only by trusting in Christ and what he did that a person can inherit eternal life.

What was amazing to me was the way this revelation simply failed to register with her. No matter how many times I tried to rephrase it or break it down, she just kept going back to the law and her idea of how it was vital to be good most of the time. She'd say, "Well, I always try to do what's right; but I still have some bad habits and I slip up now and then." So I'd try to redirect her back to Christ and what he did on the cross to save sinners. She'd listen, stare blankly for a few seconds, and then it was as if she hadn't heard a word I said. She'd go right back to arguing the myth of her own essential "most-of-the-time" goodness.

What I was seeing is this morning's Gospel text being played out – especially the part where Jesus says, "No one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father." That any of us trusts in Jesus is only by the mercy and work of God who sheds light on our inner darkness through his Word and Spirit. But because we never know for sure how and where and for whom the Lord will do this gracious work, it behooves us to be like Jesus and get the Word out there to everyone – the whole Word; not some dumbed-down, defanged, and artificially sweetened version of Christ's truth – but the whole offensive, shocking, and fearful truth that condemns sinners and points them to Christ and to him alone. That's the Bread of Life that feeds souls. That's what we need to hear to remain in the faith. And that's what others need to hear to be brought into the faith – even if it means that most will be offended by the truth and turn away from it. By God's grace some won't. Oh, they'll be offended all right – just like we were and continue to be; but like us they will hear and believe in Jesus and his Words of eternal life. Friends, by God's grace we believe – and so, in a sense, we've got the ball. Let's play some *offense*. In Jesus' name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***