

1 Kings 8: 22-30
Psalm 84
Ephesians 6:10-20
John 6:56-69

Sermon for August 22, 2021

THE VITAL PRINCIPLE

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Summary: Whenever you do this, remember me.

All four gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John – record a moment in which Simon Peter responds to a question of Jesus by saying: “You are the Christ, the holy one of God.” In Matthew and Luke, this is reported to have happened on an occasion when Jesus had taken the disciples with him on a sort of field trip to a remote place in the far north of Galilee near a town called Caesarea Philippi. Luke is much vaguer about the location of that confession, only telling us that it happened on some occasion when the disciples found Jesus praying alone. And in today's Gospel reading, John tells us that it happened in their home base town of Capernaum, as part of the extended and very difficult discourse in Chapter Six that we've been reading from for the last four Sundays, and which comes to a conclusion with our reading for this week,

It may therefore be well to remember what we've pointed out many times before, that John is not giving us a simple historical account of the events or even the actual words of Jesus. Writing long after the other Gospel writers, John, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, has been thinking about the meaning and significance of who Jesus was along with what he said, and the culmination of that long reflection is what we find in his gospel.

And so when we read John's account, what we find is that when he cites Peter's confession, it's in the context in which many of the other disciples of Jesus are falling away, returning to their regular lives because they are finally beginning to understand what Jesus is telling them, and they simply can't accept it.

So what is it that they can't accept?

Let's first read the passage together, and then return to our question.

John 6: 56-69.

Eating my flesh and drinking my blood. To the modern ear, the concepts Jesus uses here can sound fantastic, or even macabre. Couldn't Jesus have chosen more civilized images to make his point?

But we must remember the mindset and experience of those to whom Jesus was speaking, and to them, these images wouldn't have seemed grotesque at all. They were in fact common notions from the systems of religious sacrifice with which they were familiar.

In ancient times, when an animal was brought to the temple for sacrifice, the whole animal wasn't burned, only a small part as a symbol of the whole. The rest was divided up between the priest of the temple and the person offering the sacrifice. That individual in turn would make a feast of the meat for himself and his friends. At that feast, it was believed that the god of that temple actually entered into the flesh of the sacrificed animal; so when the worshipers ate that flesh, they were literally ingesting their god, nourishing themselves with the life and strength of that god.

That element of sacrificial religion wasn't as emphasized among the Jews as it was other religions, but it was still a thought with which they would have been perfectly familiar, and they would have perfectly understood what Jesus was saying using that imagery, without being shocked or disturbed by it at all.

They would have understood that Jesus was saying that *his* human flesh, the flesh of the man standing there before them, was divine.

And that answers our question about why so many of his followers abandoned him. It wasn't because he was saying something using new and disturbing imagery that offended their sensitive ears, as it might ours. It was because he was using imagery familiar to them in order to say something that was new and disturbing; in order to say that he, himself, this human individual standing in front of them, that he, himself, was God.

Or to put it another way, it is not because they didn't understand what he was saying that they were offended, not because they were confused or bewildered by what he was saying. It is exactly *because* they finally understood full well what he was saying, that they turned away from him.

Their difficulty was the same we find in our OT reading from the first book of Kings this morning. It records a speech Solomon made after finally completing the construction of the great temple in Jerusalem. Standing before the assembled crowd, Solomon turns to the temple, lifts up his arm, and offers his beautiful and impassioned prayer to the God of Israel. He praises God, and prays that God will always bless his people, that he will always inhabit this temple, God's own house, that he will answer every prayer offered in it and to it.

But the startling thing about this famous prayer is that, right in the middle of it, in verse 27, Solomon almost seems to pause, and become reflective, as if the impossibility of what he is praying suddenly occurs to him:

"But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built!"

For one brief moment, Solomon is overwhelmed by doubt. How can God, creator and master of the universe, who is everywhere and sees everything...how could God live in a house?

Solomon then resumes without answering his own question, but that is clearly the same question that confronted those disciples John tells us about, those disciples who finally understood clearly what Jesus was saying, and when they had understood, then, at that point, they turned and left him.

And if we see that, then we see why John takes Peter's confession and places it here in his Gospel. Even if it didn't actually happen in that time and in that place, John's account paints a dramatic image of the true meaning of what Jesus was saying, and its significance for those who would follow him, including us. In John's dramatic image, Jesus watches many of his followers walking away, and in sadness, perhaps even in uncertainty, he turns to those few who remain and asks them: *"Do you also wish to go away?"*

The central mystery of our faith has two elements. The first is that Jesus is fully human. The second is that Jesus is divine. The central challenge of our faith is to believe both of these.

The sacrament of our communion meals consists of these two elements: the bread and the wine. The bread represents the body, the flesh, the humanity of Christ; the wine represents his divinity.

In the communion instruction using Jesus' own words, we are told to eat the bread and drink the cup in remembrance of him.

We eat the bread as a reminder of his complete and full humanity. John himself in his first letter put it this way:

Every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God: 3And every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God...

John was insisting that we must clutch and never let go the full humanity of Jesus, that Jesus was bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh, that he was God living a real human life, facing our human situation, struggling with our human problems, battling with our human temptations, working out our human relationships. Eat this bread in remembrance of me, he says: Feed your mind and feed your heart on the thought of my humanity. To eat Christ's body in communion is to feed on the thought of his human life until our own life is identified with his, until we realize that he was and is one with us in every respect.

The wine is his image for his blood, and the blood in the Jewish mind is the life. That is the second element. What Jesus is asking us to remember in taking it is that his human life is the life of God. In drinking it, we are accepting his life as our own, and in so doing, we are accepting the very life of God as our own life. When Jesus said we must drink his blood, he meant that we must take his life into the very center and heart of our own. He was telling us to revitalize our lives with his life until we are drenched and permeated and filled with the life of God.

And what does that mean?

Does it mean we are to be kind to others, to engage in good works and acts of charity and healing and sacrifice, and spend time in prayer and worship? Yes, of course it means that. But would that explain why his disciples turned away from him. Obviously not, or at least not only that. It wasn't simply because they finally understood that Jesus was asking them to be what we would call good, upright and pious people that they found themselves no longer able to follow him. Non-Christians can be good people, too, after all.

No, it must be because there was something else about the life of God that people simply could not accept, did not even want to accept, that led them to reject Christ's invitation to drink of his blood, to make his life their own.

What was that?

At the very heart of our Lord's own prayer, he tells us. "Forgive us our debt, as we have forgiven our debtors."

Jesus was kind to people, Jesus prayed and worshiped without ceasing, Jesus healed people, but those activities were not the heart of his life, which is the heart of God's life. At the heart of Christ's life, which is the heart of God's love, Jesus forgave people. Forgiveness is the foundation of everything else in the Christian life. Forgiveness is the stone the builders rejected, but which has now become the cornerstone.

Whenever you eat my flesh, Jesus said, remember me, remember that I am human, just like you. When you drink my blood, he said, remember me, remember that my human flesh had forgiveness as its own vital principle, as its life.

And this of course is the application for each one of us: Knowing what it really means to follow Christ, do we choose to stay, or go away?

And so our prayer for this morning, gracious God, is for the willingness to accept that Your own life is a life of forgiveness, that its vital principle, its blood, is not our own, but one we must receive and accept from Jesus, our Lord and Savior, in whose name we pray.