*THE HARD SAYING*

John 6:53-61

October 3, 2021

Many sayings of Christ are difficult. This particular one, because of the misunderstanding, caused great difficulty for Christians. The Roman world around them thought Christians were cannibals.

“Unless you eat the flesh =of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you.”

A hard saying, the disciples called it. Others, within that very passage said, “Who can bear it?” Even our family friend Kadri, born in Turkey, now a naturalized U.S. citizen, who stayed with my family when he was studying at Cal Tech, wondered what this Communion thing was, drinking the blood of Christ. Kadri is a non-practicing Moslem, and it’s interesting that his son, now having graduated from Cal Berkeley, quit a job with Microsoft to be on staff with Campus Crusade for Christ.

Our Lord chose this metaphor to dramatize the importance of dwelling in constant union with Him. The allegory of the vine that is part of our Communion service: “I am the vine, and you are the branches, and apart from me you can do nothing at all,” -- this declares the same truth.

To receive from Christ what He has to give us, to have the experience of His saving power, you and I have to feed on Him. There just doesn’t seem to be any other word that expresses it with equal accuracy.

Those of us who want to be part of Jesus Christ must absorb His teaching. His character. His life. His ways. We must appropriate the life and the treasure in Him till His mind becomes our mind, and His ways become our ways. Till we think as He would if He were in our situation. And a Christian can do all this because the Lord’s power has passed on to us. It has become our power . . . a permanent help.

The context of this difficult saying is important, and may be of help to us. Jesus had fed the multitude from the 5 loaves and 2 fish, and there had been enough extra bread to fill 12 baskets. They followed Him seeking this miraculous bread of life. But Jesus declared *Himself*  to be the Bread of Life.

To Eastern people, bread was sacred. It was the stuff of life. The wheat—or corn or teff or rye--the grain was the very basis of the food pyramid, with its proteins and amino acids and fiber. It’s as basic and as widespread as a food can get. The essential life substance. To break bread with another was a sacramental act, as significant as passing the peace pipe was to the Native Americans.

To eat bread with an enemy was the sign of reconciliation. And when a refugee was given asylum and broke bread in a house, his host was responsible to defend that guest to the cost of their own life.

So bread is a sacred symbol of a covenant of trust and mutual responsibility between people. When Jesus spoke of Himself as the Bread of Life, He meant that He, His message, and His forthcoming sacrifice would do exactly what bread did. It would give life. It would sustain life. And it would reconcile life.

Here in the Gospel of John, Christ is unveiling the offer of a totally new relationship with Himself, and a new sustenance to support it.

Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man

And drink His blood, you have no life in you.

To take these elements is to *chew on* and *ingest* and *personally assimilate* the life and ministry and salvation of Jesus Christ.

Not that we eat of His flesh literally, of course, but we take into ourselves Jesus Christ, the person, the activity, the ministry, the very coming near to you of the reality of God . . . all by faith. We take His essential life, His will and purpose, into ourselves. Our breaking of bread is Christ’s pledge of power to us, and our mutual love to each other.

But eating the Communion brings with it a responsibility. To eat His flesh and drink His blood means becoming involved with Him as a flesh-and-blood extension of His person.

Could it be that the reason many people turned away at the saying ‘eat the flesh and drink the blood’ was not that they misunderstood it, but that they understood it too well? Let’s us understand.

The followers of Jesus sensed the gathering clouds, and felt the first earth tremor of Calvary. They wanted Jesus’ words and His healing, but were frightened about involvement in an unpopular cause. When Jesus said, “My flesh is food indeed; my blood is drink indeed,” Body. And blood. There’s a visceral reality there. You can feel its substance in your fingers, you can see the reality of it swirling in the cup in your hand. They were suddenly invited from observation into participation, and they recoiled from it.

But Christ did not mock the integrity of His listeners by toning down the faith. And He didn’t undercut the integrity of His ministry. Overnight the ranks thinned. Wide gaps appeared in the crowds of previously rapt listeners.

Are you and I really any different? We want Jesus Christ for what He can do for our peace and happiness, but we balk when the cost is involvement in doing what He did. In verse 67 of chapter 6, Jesus says to you and me as He speaks to the twelve, “Will you, too, turn away? And some of us answer, with Peter, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.”

Archbishop William Temple said that without the experience of Communion, the faith would become too vague, too theoretical. Communion is the Word of God illustrated. We don’t merely hear the message of divine grace, but also see and taste it. We eat and drink, which means that personally, tangibly, physically, we receive that by which we live. Just as bread is the nourishment of the body, Jesus Christ is the bread of the soul.

But again, let’s understand. There’s a razor’s edge that cuts through to the basic challenge. Here in the body broken, and the blood shed, God faces you and me with what it cost to redeem us.

For those of us who know our need of a new covenant with God, for a body broken that might bring me, might bring you, might bring our world around into one Body, broken, yet lifted up. The difficult words, ‘eat my body; drink my blood,’ are like the announcement of the arrival of food to the starving.

I am the Bread of Life. My flesh is food

indeed, and my blood is drink indeed.

This is my body.

This is my blood.

When you and I partake of Holy Communion this morning, this morning together with all the rest of the world of Christians, we partake of the person of the Saviour of the World. And our response? It is to give our own body and blood -- our real selves and resources -- to Him to be poured out in the lives of others, to be poured out into the wounds of our world.

Jesus’ saying here in John 6 is not a hard saying after all. It is a gracious promise. He offers Himself to us and calls us to an exciting part in His strategy to save the world. He is simply saying, “There is no Communion without me, without who I am, and what I have done, personally. But as Holy Communion with me carries this promise, it also carries this responsibility: you are part of me, part of what I am in this world.”

And yet, who would want to come to the Table without receiving either? [promise and responsibility] The Saviour offers to actually live in you and me, in the very fibre of our nature, and worldwide today we affirm that the fiber of Jesus also binds us to all the world around, and they to us. So in taking this, you and live in the very fibre of His being. We will never receive a better offer than that.

Here’s praying that all the world hears and does this very thing. What a kingdom that would bring in, huh?

Amen.