

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt
Fourth Presbyterian Church
21st Sunday in Ordinary Time
August 26, 2018

Responding to the Word¹

John 6:35, 56-69

If we are honest,
we must admit that we often do not want to hear the simple truth
our Teacher must tell us.

If we are honest— and that does seem to be a standout virtue these days—
we might have to confess with Mark Twain:
“It ain’t those parts of the Bible that I can’t understand that bother me;
it’s the parts I do understand.”

This would be the plain spoken meaning of the Greek word *skandalizei*,
which appears in Jesus’ question to his disciples in verse 61:
“Does this offend you?”

Last week we considered our difficulty in understanding
what exactly Jesus might mean by his strange words about
eating his flesh and drinking his blood.
And while it’s true that we may simply be unable to understand what Jesus is saying,
there is a likelihood as well
that there are things Jesus tells us that we do not want to understand.
Things that offend us.

Now living here, as we do, on the buckle of the Bible Belt,
our Southern gentility may not allow us
to admit to ourselves that Jesus sometimes offends us,
— let alone to say such a thing out loud —
but again, if we are honest,
there are times that we must admit to feeling a disturbing discomfort
upon hearing Jesus’ words.

This feeling of offense perhaps ought to be a signal to us
that Jesus’ words have approached the heart
of our spiritual struggle.

In his commentary on John chapter 6,
John Calvin suggests that it was the disciples hearts — not their minds —
that were the problem.

Feeling offended, says Calvin,
is an opportunity to humble ourselves
and be open to the “guidance of the Spirit,
that [God] may inscribe on our hearts
what otherwise would never have entered our ears.”²

Now let me pause from this line of thought
and address an objection someone may be having at this point:

You may object and say you have never been offended by Jesus,
only comforted and reassured by his wonderful words.

And to that, perhaps the gospel would say:

Exactly, dear Christian. And that is your problem.

If you have only ever been comforted and assured by Jesus' words
then you are either already a saint,
having shed all your sinful tendencies,

...or...

you haven't actually been listening to Jesus.

Still, you may counter:

It's not Jesus who offends me,

it's those misguided people who claim to speak on his behalf
and who don't know Jesus as well as I do

and are getting him all wrong.

They offend me!

With this we might sympathize and say,
I hear you.

I feel the same way when listening to some of my brothers and sisters in Christ.

But then I have to remember something; we have to remember something:

The gospel teaches that

Jesus comes to us in the guise of the neighbor, and the stranger.

Jesus who came as the Word of God made flesh,

still approaches us and speaks to us

through flesh-and-blood neighbors and strangers,

through flesh-and-blood brother and sisters

in the body of Christ.

So when our neighbor offends us, when a stranger offends us,
and we begin to feel that sense of righteous indignation welling up inside,
it may be time to exercise a little of Calvin's recommended humility
and listen.

We may still end up being offended — even for good reason —
but humility and a willing ear and a hospitable heart
are in order.

Sadly, it seems that many of Jesus' first disciples
were not able to find this humility in their hearts.

John reports: *...many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him.*

We have ways of turning back that are commonly accepted these day.

We say all the right religious things at first,

for instance, when we baptize our babies.

Yes, I'll show up. I'll follow Jesus and teach this child to do the same.

I'll raise this child in the Christian faith and in the Christian community of faith...
but we gradually stop showing up when "life gets busy,"
or we "travel a lot on the weekends,"
or we discover that "this church is full of hypocrisy and cliques"
by which we imply that we have gone to find a church that's not so—
that fabled church that never has existed, nor ever will.
So, yes, we know what John means when he reports,
...many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him.

John chapter 6 actually present us with
a number of different responses to Jesus' words —
no fewer than 6, if you count them up...

...there are those for whom religious and theological **questions** are their bread and butter,
and they get into a **dispute** about the meaning of Jesus words.
We Presbyterians, being the studious types that we are,
are pretty good at keeping things hypothetical like this.
We love a good discussion,
particularly if it helps us avoid actually doing anything uncomfortable.

...others **complained** about Jesus teaching,
commiserating with each other about how difficult it is to accept what Jesus says.

...then Jesus observes, *among you there are some who **do not believe**.*
They simply cannot accept the good news Jesus is offering them.
Whether this is a matter of the mind or of the heart, or some combination,
is a question worth asking.

...then there are the ones who **turn back**, who just slip quietly away,
and no longer go about with Jesus.

...and there is Judas, who is so offended by Jesus, that he cannot merely slip away,
but is making plans to **betray** his Master.

...finally, there are **the other 11 disciples**.
Jesus asks them, *Do you also wish to go away?*
To which Simon Peter answers,
Lord, to whom can we go?
You have the words of eternal life.
We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.

This passage is sort of John's version of Jesus' parable of the Sower,
the story in which the Sower sows seeds in various kinds and qualities of soil.
Some of the seeds take root,
while others are choked by thorns,
and others fall on hard ground and are carried away by the birds,
and still others dry up and wither away in the heat of the day.

This sermon today is entitled “Responding to the Word”
and you will note that this is also the heading of
the next movement of our worship service after the Scripture and Sermon.

It is the pattern of Christian worship
that after we encounter the Living Word of God in Jesus Christ
we are called to respond.
We do so in a variety of ways in worship:
we sing,
we join with Peter in making a public affirmation of our faith,
we give our gifts to God,
we pray and entrust God with our lives and the life of the world,
sometimes we commission members into active service.
All of these liturgical responses
are meant to shape our lived response outside of these walls
where we will be called to respond to the Word with our lives.

This all suggests
that Responding to the Word of God in Jesus Christ is not a one-time event,
but a daily event, even an hourly event, even a moment-by-moment way of life.

This is also good news.
Even those who complain and dispute may soften their hearts and receive the Word.
Even those who turn away may turn back to Jesus and begin following again.
Even those who betray Jesus, who work actively against him and seek his demise,
may find themselves overwhelmed by his love for them,
and return.

Apparently, though, with Judas being the first of many examples,
not everyone will.

But we do not give up hope for anyone.

After all, though here Jesus says, *one of you is a devil*,
referring to Judas,

recall that in the synoptic Gospels,
it is Peter to whom Jesus says,

Get behind me, Satan

when Peter rebukes Jesus
only moments after offering his powerful expression of faith.

And soon after this occasion,
it is Peter who will deny Jesus three times in his crucial hour.

But Peter returns.

And this is our hope for all who are offended by Jesus
and turn away from following him.

Later in John, Jesus assures his friends
that he is not trying to be obtuse or outlandish.
He’s not asking trick questions,
or trying to weed out the weak-minded,
when he says these things that offend them.

He assures them,

I have said these things to you to keep you from stumbling.

Interestingly, the Greek work for stumbling is, again, *skandalisthete*.

So how can a teaching of Jesus that so offends both ancient and modern ears
keep us from stumbling?

Then as now,

we truly stumble

only if we allow our questions to drive us away from Jesus.

However, if our doubts and confusion incline us toward Jesus
as a listening and consoling friend,

if we fall into his saving embrace,

then our stumbling becomes an occasion of grace.

**Jesus is urging his disciples to cling to his person
and to let meaning take care of itself.**

Like a child learning how to walk,

looking with delight into the encouraging face of her parent

as she unsteadily crosses the short distance before her,

arms outstretched,

lunging with the last stumbling steps into those familiar waiting hands,

so can our stumbling become a moment of delight

when we find ourselves caught up

into the strong nurturing embrace of Christ.

By remembering this,

we can ease our own spiritual journeys and those of our fellow pilgrims.

The path of discipleship is littered with potholes and pitfalls,
lined with enticements that call us away from wholehearted devotion to Christ,
that call us even to betrayal.

Like Peter,

we make bold assertions of allegiance, only to fall away.

Like Judas,

we are prone to aligning ourselves with the enemies of Christ.

However,

like prodigals of every age,

we can take comfort in Jesus' affirmation that though Judas *is a devil*,

he still belongs to the fold:

Did I not choose you? Jesus asks.

Despite the heartbreaking truth of Jesus' accusation
and the inevitability of Judas's betrayal,

even more true and certain

is the unfolding of God's unrelenting love for the world

in God's inexorable plan of salvation.

Though Jesus may accuse, he does not condemn.

*Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world,
but in order that the world might be saved through him.*

This is the assurance of the gospel
and the solid ground on which we stand in each moment
as we step out ...
in our next response
to Jesus, the living Word of God to us.

¹ Much of this sermon taken from Michael J. Hoyt, "Pastoral Perspective" in *Feasting on the Gospels: John, Volume I, Chapters 1-9* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015) 200-216

² John Calvin, *The Gospel According to St. John: Part One*, trans. T. H. L. Parker (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1961), 173.