

Spirited Disagreement
John 6:56 – 69; Ephesians 6:10 – 20
Sunday, August 26, 2018

Jesus picks up this week where he left off last week (and for the past three weeks), talking about himself as the bread of God that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world; comparing himself to the manna that God gave to the people of Israel in the wilderness. He says over and over again, “I am the bread of life. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood will live. They will abide in me, and I will abide in them.” This week we hear the *response* to what he has been saying.

Before we get into that response, though, one thing we need to know is that while Jesus had twelve core disciples, there were also all these other people following him and devoting themselves to his teachings, and those people *also* get referred to sometimes as his disciples. So it says here that when he finishes speaking, many of his disciples (and it’s talking about this larger group, not the twelve) heard it and said, “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?” That word *difficult* is the Greek word *skleros*, and it doesn’t just mean *hard*, like this teaching is hard to understand or follow. It means *offensive*. Difficult to accept. “This teaching is *offensive*; who can accept it?” We start off with the people around Jesus being *offended* by what he has said.

Why would they be offended? Jesus is talking about “eating my flesh and drinking my blood.” We hear that and think of communion – the body and blood of Christ in the bread and the cup. But these disciples had not yet experienced that. They had no frame of reference for communion. That hadn’t happened yet. So they hear this not metaphorically but *literally*; that Jesus is telling them to literally eat his flesh and drink his blood. They hear it as cannibalism. We talked about this last week, how when the church was first starting out, people accused

Christians of being cannibals because they heard them talking about eating the body and blood of Christ. It's the same thing here.

Now, as good, faithful Jewish people, which many (if not most) of the disciples were, cannibalism and drinking blood (of any kind) was strictly forbidden by Jewish law. They knew that was something they were not supposed to do if they wanted to be in a right relationship with God. But now Jesus is telling them that if they want to abide with God and they want God to abide with them, the only way to do that is by eating his flesh and drinking his blood. They hear Jesus as telling them to go against Jewish law and how they have always understood this to work. It would be like me saying, "If you want to be in a right relationship with God, you need to go out and murder someone." You'd be like, "Is he *serious*? That's not right!" That would be difficult for you to accept. It would be *offensive* to your understanding of righteousness and faith.

So the people listening to Jesus are offended by what he says. Jesus says to them, "Does this offend you? The *reason* it offends you is because you don't *trust*. And the reason you don't *trust* is because God hasn't given you the ability to." Well, now they are *really* offended! It says, "Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him." They left him. They were so offended by what he said that they stopped following Jesus. And if we kept reading on into chapter 7, we would see that after this Jesus had to be careful about where he went because "the Jews were looking for an opportunity to kill him." They so disagreed with what Jesus said that some of them left him and some of them wanted to kill him.

How do we deal with people with whom we disagree? And I'm not talking about the little disagreements (favorite sports teams or whether we should do communion by intinction or

passing the trays). I'm talking about how we deal with people who hold a totally different worldview than us. People with whom we fundamentally disagree on matters of politics and religion and life in general. People whose words or actions have deeply offended us or hurt us. Do we just leave them? Separate ourselves from them? Cut them out of our lives and have nothing to do with them? Or do we fight them – maybe verbally, maybe physically? You might think that's a stretch, but it happens in our world every single day.

It is so easy to vilify and demonize those with whom we disagree. It starts off simple. We say that we disagree because they are misguided or stupid. They just don't *get it*. They aren't smart enough to see the truth. But from there, it's not a big leap until we start saying, "They're *evil*. We disagree, not because they have a different worldview based on different life experiences, but because these are *bad people*. They want to *hurt* us. They want to take what we have and destroy what we've built. They are evil." It is so easy to do that, and we see it happening all around us in America and around the world today.

But to that way of thinking, both Jesus and Paul say, "No. That is *not* how we are called to treat one another and live life together."

Paul writes to the Ephesians, a church that was born out of fundamental disagreements. Disagreements between Jews and Gentiles over what it meant to belong to God. Some said, "If you're not Jewish, if you're a Gentile, there is no place for you in God's kingdom, and you have no hope of ever changing that." Then they disagreed over whether Gentiles could become Christians. Then they disagreed over, "Well, Gentiles *can* become Christians, but they have to become *Jews* first and follow Jewish law." Then they finally ended up at this place where they

were able to say, “Gentiles can become Christians. They don’t have to become Jews first. They are loved and accepted by God *just the way they are.*”

And so Paul is able to write to this church and say in chapters 2 and 3, “You, who were once far off, aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, without Christ and having no hope, you have been brought near by God. God has made both groups (Jews and Gentiles) into one new humanity, breaking down the dividing wall and the hostility that is between us. Christ has proclaimed peace to you who were far off and to you who were near, and now both of us are heirs to the inheritance of God. We are members of the same body, sharing in the promise of Christ Jesus.”

So these groups that had fundamental disagreements over life and faith have found a way to live life together as one. And as Paul is concluding this letter to them, he says, “Our struggle is not against enemies of flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil.” Our struggle is not against each other. It is against the spiritual forces that are at work in this world, trying to separate us from each other.

People are not evil. There is evil in this world, the power of which sometimes works in and through people. We have seen that throughout history. But no human being is inherently evil. When we label someone as evil, we are saying that there is nothing good in this person, and there is no possibility of redemption. That is *not* the message of Jesus. All of us can fall victim to the power of greed and lust and fear and hatred. Those evil forces can work in us, distorting the image of God and the inherent goodness that is in us. But what Paul is saying here is that we have to keep our focus on the real problem. The real enemy is not this other person. It is the power of sin and evil at work in this world. We *all* sin and fall short of the glory of God. None

of us is better than anyone else in that respect. We are *all* susceptible to these spiritual forces and the power of evil. And the way Paul says we *resist* those powers is by putting on the armor of God.

Now, this is a difficult text that we have to be careful with. Theologian Brian Peterson writes that “The language of armor and battle is dangerous in the hands of us humans who have proven ourselves too quick to pick up non-metaphorical weapons of war. The church has too often aligned itself with various empires and military forces. Church history contains too many examples of crusades and of blessing the armies and weapons intended to annihilate other members of God’s creation.”¹ In other words we can be like those people who heard Jesus literally rather than metaphorically and were so offended that they turned away from him. If *we* hear this literally rather than metaphorically, it can cause us to turn away from Jesus. Because the way of Jesus is the way of peace; the way of love.

Paul is doing something specific here. If you were here last week, we saw how Paul was setting up these contrasts between the wisdom of *God* and the wisdom put forth by the dominant culture. He’s saying, “Don’t be *that* way, but be *this* way.” He’s doing something similar here. These Christians in Ephesus are living out their faith in the midst of the Roman Empire, this powerful military and economic force that is oppressing them. *That* is the dominant culture. How do *they* deal with people with whom they disagree? With force. With weapons. They put on their armor and go to battle. But Paul is saying here, “*Our* struggle is not against enemies of flesh and blood, but against the spiritual forces of evil. Therefore, you don’t need real, physical weapons and armor. You are called to take up the armor of *God*. We do not fight those with whom we disagree with swords and armor. Rather, we resist the powers of evil by clothing ourselves in

¹ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3750

truth and righteousness and faith and peace and salvation and the Word of God and prayer.”

He’s not being militaristic here. He is using an image they would understand to communicate the call to something greater.

There’s this one line that Jesus says in our reading from John. He says, “It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless.” We can hear that as, “Our physical, material lives do not matter. Flesh is *bad*. It’s all about the spiritual.” But remember, John starts off his gospel by saying that “the Word *became* flesh and dwelled among us.” God didn’t just come to us as *spirit*. God came to us in the flesh and blood of Jesus. And right before this, Jesus has been talking about how his flesh is what gives life to the world; that you have to partake in his flesh to live. The flesh isn’t *useless*. What gets translated here as *useless* are the Greek words *opheleo oudeis*. *Oudeis* means “no one” or “nothing.” *Opheleo* means “to profit,” “to assist,” or “to advantage.” So what Jesus is saying here is that the flesh is not what assists us or gives us an advantage. The *Spirit* does that. Flesh by itself *is* useless, but flesh that is filled with the power of God’s Spirit is where we find *life*. So Jesus isn’t saying that the flesh is *bad*, he’s saying, “The flesh is not all there is. That’s not where we *really* find *life*. There’s this whole other world out there that God is calling us to see.”

And if we put that together with what Paul is saying, we hear that our *enemies* are not flesh, but spirit. Therefore, what will *save us* is not flesh, but spirit. Weapons and armor are not what will save us. What will save us is truth and righteousness and faith and peace and salvation and the Word of God and prayer. *That* is what will help us stand firm and resist the power of evil while loving one another. Looking *beyond* the flesh and seeing the *spirit*.

So how do we deal with those with whom we disagree? How do we resist evil when evil *takes on* flesh and blood? I think back to how this question was debated during the Civil Rights Movement. On one side you had people like Martin Luther King, Jr. practicing nonviolent resistance. Then you had *other* people like Malcolm X saying, “By any means necessary,” even violence. How were they supposed to resist racism and fight oppression – with nonviolent resistance or with violence? This was the struggle that Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrestled with as a Christian in Nazi Germany. He knew that Jesus calls us to nonviolence, but he also felt that the only thing that could stop Hitler was killing him. What do you do?

We see these same struggles taking place among us today. As Neo-Nazis march in Charlottesville and Washington D.C. and *all across* our country, you have some groups saying that nonviolent protest is the way to counter them, while other groups like Antifa say that physical violence is necessary. How do we deal with people with whom we disagree?

Let me tell you two stories. The first was one year ago in Charlottesville, Virginia, as white supremacists and Neo-Nazis marched and protestors countered them. There *was* violence that day, by white supremacists and also by members of Antifa who were fighting back against them. But there was also an African-American woman named Lisa Sharon Harper, who spent most of the day standing directly across from a line of white supremacists, singing, and praying, and speaking words of love. All day long, she had been talking to this one man in particular, a member of a militia, who was standing there with a gun. As violence broke out around them, and they started telling everyone that it was time to leave, Lisa Harper looked at him and said, “I just want you to know, we love you.” She was able to see that this *man* was not her enemy; that she was fighting against the spirit of racism that was at work in him. And because of that, she was able to *love* him. And it says, “The man’s face, grizzled and tired from the day, suddenly

softened. After a moment, he replied, “I love you, too.” He was able to see that this woman was not his enemy. He was able to see the Spirit of God at work in her. And he was able to love her.²

The second story takes place one month ago, on July 21. A white man named Ken Parker had been in Charlottesville a year earlier, wearing the black uniform of the National Socialist Movement, a Neo-Nazi group. He had joined the Ku Klux Klan in 2012, but he said the Klan wasn’t hateful enough for him, so he became a Nazi. He went to Charlottesville, he said, “To stand up for my white race.” While he was there, he got heat exhaustion, and a Middle Eastern woman who was there filming a documentary, took care of him. He said, “She was completely respectful to me and my fiancée the whole time. And so that kind of got me thinking: She’s a really nice lady. Just because she’s got darker skin and believes in a different god than the god I believe in, why am I hating these people?”

A few months later, he saw an African-American neighbor having a cookout near the pool of his apartment complex. He went up and started talking to the man, who it turned out was a pastor at a local African-American church. They talked more and more over the following months, and he went to the church’s Easter service. It was there he decided that he’d had enough. A week later, he stood up before that congregation, shared his story, and asked for forgiveness. And on July 21, wearing a *different* kind of white robe, he waded out into the Atlantic Ocean, where he was baptized by that African-American pastor. He was able to see that that filmmaker, that pastor, were not his enemies. He was able to see the Spirit of God in them. And their love was able to overcome the spirit of hatred in him. And it *redeemed* him.³

² <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/anxiousbench/2017/08/mennonites-behind-clergy-protests-charlottesville/>

³ <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/ex-klk-member-denounces-hate-groups-one-year-after-rallying-n899326>

How do we deal with people with whom we disagree? By remembering that our enemies are not of flesh and blood. We have to look *beyond* that to see the *spirit* at work in that person. And when we *see that*, we will be able to *love* even those with whom we disagree.