

Does This Offend You? Sunday, 1/3/21

Does this picture offend you? Probably not, because we all understand that it's just a cookie with the top bitten off and not a real person whose been injured. In fact, I've probably made you hungry for gingerbread! Why is it that it's so much fun to eat gingerbread people, and how did that custom start? It was actually Queen Elizabeth I in the 1500's who history records as making gingerbread people popular. Her royal gingerbread maker produced figures in the likeness of notable people, probably as an act of diplomacy.¹ The common people of that time ate gingerbread people in the likeness of love interests they were hoping to win over! I suspect that none of those ideas carried over to our time, and it's simply fun to nibble off the heads, arms, and legs of a gingerbread person, much as it's fun to take apart an Oreo cookie and eat it. But if you stop to think about it, it's actually a rather gruesome practice, isn't it, especially at Christmas? Why would anyone want to celebrate the birth of the Prince of Peace by dismembering a tiny little person? To someone unfamiliar with the practice and our cultural context, it might seem downright barbaric!

How about this image? Does this offend you? Changing the face and putting the name of "Jesus" on the gingerbread person certainly changes the context, doesn't it? I'm showing this to you because I think we've all become overly familiar and comfortable with the language we use each month when we receive Holy Communion. "This is the body of Christ, broken for you." More and more people are coming to church without any previous experience with church, Sunday School, or the Bible, and so I have to wonder if at least some of those people might be offended by the idea that we experience joy by eating the body and drinking the blood of Jesus. And if it's offensive today, just imagine how it might have been received by the first disciples of Jesus. But that kind of language wasn't just reserved for what we've come to call The Lord's Supper, Holy Communion, or the Eucharist. Jesus actually used it in a broader sense to underline the radical nature of conversion to Christianity and His expectations of those who follow him. The challenge issued by Jesus is made clear in our next reading from the Gospel of John, chapter 6, beginning with verse 48. I'm reading from the New Living Translation.

¹ <https://time.com/4602913/gingerbread-men-history/>

{Read John 6:47-63, 66-68 NLT}

This has got to be one of the most confusing passages within the Gospels, and probably one of the most misunderstood- both back in the day when Jesus spoke these words, and today, when we read them. It's really no wonder that the disciples responded the way they did, saying, "This is very hard to understand. How can anyone accept it?"² Let's forget what we think we know about these words, and put ourselves in the shoes of those first disciples. Do the words of Jesus offend us? And will we, like many of them, turn tail and desert him?

When Jesus says that we must eat his flesh and drink his blood, does He mean that we are all to nibble away at his body, in the same way that we nibble on a gingerbread person? Of course not. Does that mean, then, that Jesus was referring to the Lord's Supper? That's an awfully tempting conclusion, but it's almost certainly wrong. While it's possible that Jesus might have intended a secondary reference to Communion, it's obviously not the main thing He had in mind. In fact, eating his body and drinking his blood isn't even the main point of the Lord's Supper. And here's why I say that.

First, nowhere in any of the gospels is the claim made that salvation comes by receiving communion. And yet, John plainly writes in his Gospel that "these are written so that you may continue to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing in him you will have life by the power of his name."³ Jesus must be talking about something other than communion, then, because eternal life comes through faith in Jesus, not from eating the communion bread and drinking the wine or juice. Does that come as a surprise to you? Only Jesus grants eternal life, and only to those who believe in him- with their hearts, lips, and their actions. Does that offend you? We practice communion as an act of faith in our communities of faith, and the value of communion comes in discovering and growing a living faith in Jesus Christ.

What was Jesus up to then with this over-the-top language about his body and blood? Jesus was very concerned that his followers might pay too much attention to his miracles and not enough attention to following him. For example, earlier in this same chapter of John,

² John 6:60. New Living Translation (2nd Edition).

³ John 20:31. Ibid.

Jesus miraculously fed 5,000 people with only five loaves of bread and two fish. But the crowd didn't get it! So he had to explain himself: "I tell you the truth, you want to be with me because I fed you, not because you understood the miraculous signs. But don't be so concerned about perishable things like food. Spend your energy seeking the eternal life that the Son of Man can give you."⁴ They thought he was going to keep feeding them with bread, just as God provided manna for Moses and the Israelites wandering in the wilderness. But Jesus wanted them to pay attention to spiritual matters, not just physical ones; what Jesus refers to as "living bread."⁵

So why did Jesus talk about eating his flesh and drinking his blood if he didn't mean exactly that? He was using a metaphor, just like he did when he talked about taking the 2x4's out of our eyes before pointing out the specks in our neighbor's eyes.⁶ Eating and drinking was often used in Jewish teaching as a metaphor for taking a teaching within the center of one's being. Jesus was saying that we have to let His life transform us completely, from the inside out. Like my examples from today's Early Word segment, it was a forerunner of the modern expression: "You are what you eat." Don't get me wrong here. There's more to Communion and discipleship than merely symbolic acts and remembrance. We do believe in the mysterious, transcendent presence and power of God. But we know that Jesus and the Gospel writers used colorful language and images to challenge assumptions and spark imaginations.

German theologian Adolf Schlatter famously said this: "What we have to do with his flesh and blood is not chew and swallow, but that we recognize in his crucified body and poured out blood the ground of our life, that we hang our faith and hope on that body and blood and draw from there our thinking and our willing."⁷ That's what it means to eat his flesh and drink his blood. And as it turns out, that's also what it means to receive communion: to "hang our faith and hope on that body and blood and draw from there our thinking and our willing." Did you realize that communion carried such a demand on your life? Did you realize that Jesus expects so much from his disciples? Does this offend you?

⁴ John 6:26-27. Ibid.

⁵ John 6:5. Ibid.

⁶ Matthew 7:3-5.

⁷ Cited in Randy Clover (2009). *An Introduction to Interpreting the Scriptures*.

When Jesus gathered the disciples together in the Upper Room to celebrate the Passover meal, he didn't intend to cause centuries of confusion within the church about the meaning of the sacrament. He was simply restating what he had already said before in his teaching: Something new is coming. In fact, it's here, through me. The way to get right with God and with your neighbor is no longer through the sacrifice of animal flesh and blood. There's a better way now. If you want the best of what God has to offer, you have to follow me. But I don't just mean follow me in name. It's not enough to say you believe in me. If you say you love me but don't love your brothers and your sisters, then you're a liar. So live out your faith as if you were me.

And when you eat bread, remember my body broken for you, and remember that you are to become my body for the world so completely that it's as if you actually ate my flesh and were transformed from the inside out. And when you drink, remember my blood spilled for you, and remember that a right relationship with God is made possible not because of who you are or what you've done, but because you've received in the center of your being the one person who can do what you can't. I have come that you may have life, and have it abundantly.

Jesus said so many provocative things that riled the crowds. This "body and blood" business led to a large number of would-be disciples turning around and abandoning him. His teachings on the love of money led many to walk away sad. Miracles, demon possession, creation, sexuality- there's an endless list of provocative teachings in the Bible. What has Jesus said to offend you? Is it possible that you haven't understand what he was saying? Is it possible the church and the culture we're living in have twisted the meaning of His teachings to serve their own purposes? And is it possible that Jesus offends you because he's put his finger on a part of your life that you're still grasping tightly instead of turning it over to God? If you're interested in answering those questions, I suggest that you set out two chairs today, one for you and one for Jesus, and start a conversation in prayer. Because ultimately, all questions and answers come in the context of relationship, and it's almost impossible to ask the questions or hear the answers if you're not sitting face-to-face. That's true for all our human relationships, and it's true for our relationship with Jesus as well.

Please take some time now to reflect on how and when you'll make yourself available

for conversation with Jesus. If you like, you can share a comment or a prayer.



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