

“How Different do YOU Want to Be?”

(1 Kings 2: 10-12, 3: 3-14; Ephesians 5: 15-20; Psalm 111; John 6: 51-58)

One thing you really have to study and get your head around, if you hope to make any sense of who Jesus was, is this: how was Jesus *different* from all others? You have to push that question in a few different directions. For example, you need to ask how was he different from the people *right around* him—his own disciples, his Pharisee critics, John the Baptist, the Chief Priest in Jerusalem, the Roman governor? How was Jesus different from *all* his contemporaries? And then you need to widen *that* circle and ask, how was he different from that rich Jewish tradition that he came out of, and then, how was he different from any other leader of any other religious tradition? How was Jesus *different*? And, just *how* different was he? Those are the key questions for an informed and understanding Christian faith.

Often it happens in the gospels that Jesus gives a pretty good answer to that question, or at least a sneak preview of the answer. In this sixth chapter of John’s gospel, that we have been working through for almost a month, Jesus has been touching on some of those differences, and he’s been doing that primarily by means of the symbol of *bread*. He began, in this chapter, by feeding a hungry multitude—people who were hungry for the ordinary, everyday kind of bread. But they received the most unusual bread—bread that was thoroughly mysterious and miraculous in its origins, bread that nourished and filled something much deeper than ordinary hunger or temporary survival. In answering their questions as to what this meant and what was different about this bread, Jesus said, “I AM this living bread, this bread of heaven, bread for eternal life.” Let me emphasize that statement. Whatever it is that provides and nourishes the possibility of eternal life, Jesus is *it*. He embodies and personifies it. And in his follow-up comment, from our text this morning, he invites us—all of us—to *eat* this bread that he *is*. “This bread is my *flesh*,” he says quite bluntly, “which I give for the world.”

Well, people, *that* statement is about as different as anything you will *ever* hear. Nobody in the entire biblical record had *ever* said anything like *that* before. So, in reply to our question about just *how* different Jesus is, here the answer is: “Right off the scale!” Different *almost* beyond belief—no, in fact it *is* beyond belief for some of them, even among his own disciples. Others in the crowd can’t get beyond the most absurdly literal interpretation, wondering right out loud if he’s advocating cannibalism! And *that’s* just about as different as you can get from all the rest of humanity, isn’t it?

That particular *caricature* of the difference about Jesus—offering his *flesh* to eat and his *blood* to drink—that one really stuck in the ancient world, among both Jewish folks and Gentiles. Accusations of cannibalism were also applied, right from the start, to his disciples and all the followers in the early church, branding them as “*dangerously* different”, and forcing them to ask, not just how different was *Jesus*, but how different did *they* want to be? How different did they *dare* to be in the eyes of the world?

Leonard Sweet, in his commentary on this text, did a little reminiscing about high school years and about the real problem of being *different*. It’s a known fact that in high schools all over the world,

but most especially in North America, *cliques* are the most important unit of reality. Every possible grouping of young characters gets its own label. Every pack has its own indelible identity. There are “Jocks” and “Cheerleaders”, “Goths” and “Geeks”, “Nerds” and “Freaks”, “Potheads” and “Pansies”, “Skinheads” and “Skaters”, “Preppies” and “Book Worms”, “Tomboys” and “Choir Girls”. How *ironic* it is that in *high school*—the place where, supposedly, we’re being primed and prepared for expanding possibilities and a broadening viewpoint, the day-to-day reality is so utterly *narrow*, so obsessed with even the slightest differences that everyone gets rigidly *pigeon-holed*, sorted, marked and *labelled*. And if you wander *outside* any of those categories, I mean if you dare to be different *beyond* the existing pigeon-holes, you are in for a very rough ride indeed.

If you actually *survived* high school—and it looks like at least a few of us did—if you successfully ran that gauntlet of rigid labels and nasty epithets, then you know from experience that being tagged as “different” is not usually a good thing. Well, Jesus clearly knew that, and that’s part of the drama that’s going on in our text today. Even though Jesus tries generally to keep a low profile, his differences couldn’t really be hidden, at least not for long. It was being *different*—a little *too* different—that got Jesus in trouble, first of all with the religious fundamentalists, then with the authorities, both religious and secular. “Being different” is precisely what got him *so quickly* up on that cross, and basically that’s what it said on the little sign they put above his head: “*This is what you get for being that different!*”

If Jesus failed to fit or *refused* to fit into any of those preconceived pigeon-holes for a Messiah, then the first generations of his followers were going to have to run the very same gauntlet. A lot of people in the ancient world, including the best philosophers and historians, couldn’t figure out just *what* these Christians were. They weren’t *Jews*, though many of them still worshipped in synagogues and read Hebrew Scriptures; neither were they *Gentiles*, dabbling, as all the Gentiles did, in every religion available. They talked and talked about “everyone loving each other” but they did not have orgies. They came together frequently for *celebrations*, yet the wine did not flow endlessly nor did moral boundaries disappear as the celebrations went on. They talked about eating flesh and drinking blood—feasting on some dead guy—yet they *denied* cannibalism. They crossed all the *class* boundaries, so you couldn’t label them economically or socially. They weren’t really any worse or any better than anyone else, so all the usual comparisons and categories broke down. They were just really, *really* different. True, they did make good scapegoats for any political problems in the Empire, even though they presented no organized threat of any sort. They were just so uncomfortably *different* that people hardly knew what to call them. But that “cannibal” thing—that was a handy tag. That one stuck, for many centuries and in a lot of different parts of the world.

Well, this is getting a little heavy. Let’s lighten the load for a minute here and let me work in one of my favourite cannibal jokes. Recently, a large American corporation, under the directive of “equal opportunity employment”, hired several cannibals to increase their corporate diversity and broaden their

public image. "You are all part of our team now," said the Human Resources officer during his welcoming address. "You get all the standard benefits and you can go to the cafeteria for something to eat *whenever* you feel hungry, so please don't eat any employees." The cannibals promised they would not. Four weeks later, their boss called them together again and remarked, "You're all working very hard and I am satisfied with your work. We have noticed a sharp increase in the whole company's performance. However, one of our *secretaries* has disappeared. Do any of you know what happened to her?" The cannibals all quietly shook their heads. After the boss had left, the leader of the cannibals said to the others, "Which one of you idiots ate the secretary?" After a long pause, one hand rose hesitantly. "You fool!" the leader continued. "For four weeks we've been eating *managers* and no one noticed anything. But Noooooooo, *you* had to go and eat someone who actually *does* something!"

Back to our gospel text, I need to make two points very clear about the somewhat gory, potentially offensive, politically incorrect, cannibalistic language in these verses. First of all, Christian people ever since have been far too quick to *spiritualize* these words, to apply them immediately to the *sacramental* meal, thus to avoid thinking about *real* bits of flesh or pools of blood. I tell you confidently, in speaking of his flesh and blood, Jesus was not merely pointing far ahead to a sacrament of the church, he was also pointing straight to the *cross*. He was talking about his death. And for *his* death, bits of flesh *were* going to be thrown everywhere, as Mel Gibson portrayed quite accurately in the whipping scene of *The Passion of the Christ*. When Jesus talks about his flesh and blood, people, don't jump *too quickly* to the bread and wine on the Communion Table. There really *was* flesh broken and blood spilled, and it's only because *that* was the case that we have our sacramental *symbols* of bread and wine.

A second point about this text is probably a little nearer and dearer to the heart of the writer of this gospel. You see, when John's gospel is written, it's quite probably about *two* generations into Christian history. Unfortunately, by that time there are some very *wrong* ideas and *theologies* beginning to circulate among Christian people. One such idea, which the writer of this gospel had to contend with, was the idea that Jesus was never *really* or *totally* human, but only *seemed* to be human and thus his suffering and his flesh and his blood were *not real*. Those things only *appeared* to be real. They had a symbolic value, to be sure, but Jesus, if he was the same as God, had to be pure Spirit—so there could be no real flesh and blood. Well, as John the Evangelist recalls the story, Jesus was quite specific about *real* flesh and real blood, and *he* did not jump immediately to symbolic or *sacramental* explanations. In John's gospel, the strong point is that *without* real torn flesh and messy spilled blood, there is *no* sacramental food. The flesh and blood we talk about at the Table are *extremely* real, says John. And I say, "Hallelujah! In the power of the Spirit, that writer nailed it!"

There is most definitely real flesh and real blood in the story of Jesus. What we modern Christians talk about, ritualize and celebrate in sacrament, is not *all* symbolic. It's not just conceptual or cerebral or spiritual. There's a ground floor reality we dare not lose sight of. The "flesh and blood" we

talk about are real almost beyond belief, *still* today, no *less* today. There is torn flesh and spilled blood at the very heart of our Christian faith, and don't let anybody tell you otherwise. And among professing, witnessing Christians in some areas of our world *today*, there is *still* torn flesh and blood, and don't let anyone tell you otherwise about that, either.

I mentioned earlier, following that awful joke, that cannibal-spotting can be especially good *in church*. And we also talked about how obsessively discriminating the whole high school experience was, and still is. Let's bring those two points together. If high school was a pigeon-holing kind of experience, then Christian churches tend to do that in spades. And if you think of cannibals as the most barbaric, primitive and *distant* of peoples, then you might need to look little more closely, a little more locally. Christians can be quite accomplished when it comes to biting and devouring each other. I'd be willing to bet that the majority of us have some scars to prove that point.

Christians, for some strange reason, rarely get beyond high school, because they pigeon-hole each other into denominations, and *fractions* of denominations, into traditions or spiritual styles or theological camps, and they can do that more quickly and effectively than the post-office people get the letters into those little boxes. This is a paradox even bigger than that of high school, because in *church* the idea is that we're all growing in faith, broadening our minds, expanding our horizons, trying to attain unity with the whole of the human race, but in reality we slice the thing up into the tiniest little fractions, we maximize the smallest differences, and we label every single one of them. Awesome, isn't it? Honestly, if I had thought that being a Christian might have meant going right back to high school, I might not have joined! If I thought that growing in Christian faith meant shrinking my worldview and lowering my expectations, I might not have jumped on board.

In spite of all our miserable failings and painfully stupid high school ideas, Jesus says, "Feed on me and *I'll make* you different; take *me* into *you* and things can change; think about this real flesh and blood that *I* give to make *you* different. "Follow me," he says, "and dare to be as different as *I* am."

Rev. Steven K. Smith
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