



ST BART'S

A SERMON by:

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Life-Giving Trumps Hard

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, August 26, 2012

The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Based on Ephesians 6:10-20 and John 6:56-69

The next-to-last week of summer is often so quiet that newscasters have to scrape around for something to report. Not this year. This past week we learned a new redundancy: “forcible rape.” Then we learned that what happens in Vegas doesn’t always stay in Vegas. Friday’s tragic shooting at the Empire State Building hit close to home—physically, within a mile of us, and spiritually, occurring as it did on the Feast of St. Bartholomew. Today we are looking at two National Conventions, tropical storm/hurricane Isaac, and the US Open all on the move. Not a quiet news week.

Even closer to home, within our congregation, babies were born, weddings are being prepared for, surgeries have been performed and healing is underway, several of us lost dear longtime friends, our Choristers had a blast at chorister camp while practicing a year’s worth of music. And that’s just in our neck of the woods. Farther from home, violence continued to escalate in Syria, with the numbers of refugees streaming out of Syria threatening to overwhelm the humanitarian efforts. I guess from God’s viewpoint, no week is ever really quiet, is it?

If you’ve been at church in the last month of Sundays, or if you’ve been keeping up with the readings, you may feel like August must be a slow news month for the Gospel, too. If you heard today’s Gospel and experienced a sense of “*Déjà vu* all over again,” you’re right. This is the fifth week in a row we’ve been reading from the sixth chapter of John’s Gospel, a chapter some clergy call “the bread series.”

The bread series started with Jesus feeding the 5,000 from five barley loaves, then having twelve baskets of bread left over. Then the action moves to Jesus teaching in the synagogue in Capernaum, the home base of his adult years. The teachings of John’s Jesus sound increasingly strange and graphic: Don’t focus on perishable food, but food that endures for eternal life. The true bread from heaven gives life to the world. I am the bread of life, the living bread that came down from heaven. The strangeness and graphic images crescendo to this talk of eating his flesh and drinking his blood: “The bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood will have eternal life.” (It’s even worse than it sounds: this Greek word for “eat” does not mean politely with knife and fork, but “munch or chew” as an animal chews its feed.) Those who chew my flesh and drink my blood abide in me and I in them.

We’ve had some excellent sermons on this bread series these past weeks, and I commend them to you in print or audio on the web. As I meditated on these readings this week, what drew my heart was “the hard word” and that image of many/most of Jesus’ disciples streaming away from him . . . like a tide receding, leaving him and his little band of twelve alone on the rocky shore.

When many of Jesus’ disciples hear the words Jesus was saying, they exclaim, “This teaching is difficult—this is a hard word; who can accept it?” Hard meaning not intellectually difficult to understand, but hard in the sense of harsh, unacceptable, offensive. Hard to swallow.

Most scholars agree that these hard-to-accept, scandalous words are more those of the writer of the Gospel than they are of Jesus himself. Yet John’s words carry a great truth. Think of how Jesus lived: He ate with everybody—prostitutes, tax collectors, rich Pharisees, friends, strangers. He treated women as valued people. He treated children like they matter. He touched lepers and crazy people and poor people, and he healed them all. He didn’t own a home or a lot of stuff. He redefined “family” and, if I may put it this way, he redefined “family values.” He subverted a system built on exploitation, hierarchy and rigid purity codes. He kept pointing to God, not to himself.

Think of what Jesus taught: Love one another as I have loved you. Sell what you have and give to the poor. Forgive those who have wronged you. Pray for those who persecute you. Love your enemies. Love your enemies . . . that’s about the hardest word I know.

No wonder Jesus—himself, his words and how he lived his life, all of the above—scandalized those around him. No wonder most of Jesus’ followers turned away and went back to the way of life they knew.

What do you know of leaving, of turning back because the word is too hard, too difficult to accept? What do you know of leaving, of turning back because something is so hard, so demanding, so offensive that you simply cannot continue with it?

I would guess many of us know what it is come to a watershed moment, when we realize we have to turn around; we realize we simply cannot continue on the way we were headed. A marriage or relationship has turned abusive or become a dead space despite all efforts to bring it back to life. A respected leader or political party or group you belong to goes seriously off course, and you can’t follow. The company you work for engages in unethical, immoral practices, and you realize you can’t go along with it or be part of it, no matter how much it pays. You hit bottom.

Sometimes, if we're honest with ourselves, we admit that what's required really is more than we can do. Like climbers who realize they just can't make it to the top of Everest. Like Diana Nyad, the endurance swimmer, now age 63, who this past week made her fourth attempt to swim the 100 miles from Cuba to Florida. After four days of storms, jellyfish stings and shark threats, she had to stop and turn back.

Or like the highly educated, retired executive who studied Christianity extensively and attended services and tried every volunteer ministry his church had to offer, and finally confessed to his pastor, "I've read everything and tried everything. This is a good place, but I won't be coming back." The pastor, "No, no, if we can just meet in my office and talk more about this, I'm sure you'll understand—it just takes time. The man replied, "Oh, I understand all right. I just can't do this. It's too hard."

As the great American theologian, Mark Twain, put it: "Most people are bothered by those passages of Scripture they do not understand; but the passages that bother me are those I do understand."

There is honesty and no shame in admitting that sometimes we do need to turn away or turn back. I have to admire the honesty of Jesus' followers who said, "That's it—this is just too much. I can't do this any more."

Maybe everything in us screams, "Leave! Turn around, go back!" but we stay only because there is no other option. I wonder if that may have been the case with Peter. When Jesus asks, "Well, what about you 12—do you want to leave, too?" Peter answers, "Lord, where else can we go? Who else can we follow? You and your teaching are what is life-giving. You *are* the Holy One of God."

Peter gets it—for now. But Peter stumbles later. There does come a time when even Peter cannot follow and needs to leave. But Peter comes back. That ragged little band of imperfect people falls away; later they return, too. What this flesh-and-blood person with his hard words, this Word become flesh and dwelling among us, what he brought was so deeply life-giving that it kept spreading, against all odds. Over and over again, for 2,000 years and counting, life-giving keeps trumping hard.

So what about all of us gathered here? What draws you here today, or draws you back week after week, or maybe even year after year? Chances are that our being here in this place signals that we are seeking in our various ways to follow Jesus, trying to learn as best we can how to follow Jesus' example and teaching. We do it because, quite simply, it is life-giving—life-giving in a way that matters more than anything else.

Yes, this space is stunning; this music is sublime, world-class; the people of St. Bart's are amazing, I can attest to that. All are good reasons to be here. Wonderful as they are, in themselves they are not enough. At the center, what anchors this community and holds us together and animates us, is new life given over and over again, new life born of flesh and Spirit.

When we gather like this, we take the Word, the hard but life-giving Word, into ourselves. We hear the Word, and at this table we feast on the Word made flesh. "This is my body. This is my blood. Do this in remembrance of me." When we gather around this table, our flesh joins with God's Spirit. When we gather around this table and take the bread and wine set apart, made holy, into our own flesh, in some mysterious way Jesus is present among us, and the Spirit flows through us and in us.

Something happens when we take this bread. We chew it, we swallow it. It literally becomes part of us. No matter that when we take it, we may not understand everything about it, or even anything at all about it. No matter that sometimes we may just go through the motions; maybe that's all we can do that day. No matter that the small white disk we eat actually bears little resemblance to a real piece of bread—or flesh, for that matter. No matter any of these things.

Despite our imperfections and lapses in attention or lapses in belief, when we take this bread and this wine into our own bodies, something happens, even if we don't realize it. "You are what you eat." In our case, as Christians, when we eat together like this, we take the Word, the Word made flesh, into our flesh. When we do that, we become in some way an incubator for the Word made flesh to grow in our flesh and blood and be born in a new way through our body into the world.

"The one who eats this bread will live forever." "Live forever" doesn't mean living to 150 or beyond. "Living forever/having eternal life" is about life right here, right now, not just in some future time. It's about quality, not quantity.

This hard word, this Word made flesh that we take into our flesh, is life-giving. Through our own flesh and blood, the Word brings eternal life not only for ourselves but for the whole world God is creating.

Amen.

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