

What Now?

Fourteenth Sunday After Pentecost
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Chesterfield, VA

Grant, O merciful God, that your Church, being gathered together in unity by your Holy Spirit, may show forth your power among all peoples, to the glory of your Name; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18 (NRSV)

Then Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem, and summoned the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel; and they presented themselves before God. ² And Joshua said to all the people, "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: Long ago your ancestors—Terah and his sons Abraham and Nahor—lived beyond the Euphrates and served other gods.

¹⁴ "Now therefore revere the LORD, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. ¹⁵ Now if you are unwilling to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD."¹⁶ Then the people answered, "Far be it from us that we should forsake the LORD to serve other gods; ¹⁷ for it is the LORD our God who brought us and our ancestors up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and who did those great signs in our sight. He protected us along all the way that we went, and among all the peoples through whom we passed; ¹⁸ and the LORD drove out before us all the peoples, the Amorites who lived in the land. Therefore we also will serve the LORD, for he is our God."

Ephesians 6:10-20 (NRSV)

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. ¹¹ Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. ¹² For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. ¹³ Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. ¹⁴ Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. ¹⁵ As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. ¹⁶ With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. ¹⁷ Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. ¹⁸ Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints. ¹⁹ Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, ²⁰ for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak.

John 6:56-69 (NRSV)

[Jesus said,] “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. ⁵⁷ Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. ⁵⁸ This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever.” ⁵⁹ He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum. ⁶⁰ When many of his disciples heard it, they said, “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?” ⁶¹ But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, “Does this offend you? ⁶² Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? ⁶³ It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. ⁶⁴ But among you there are some who do not believe.” For Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe, and who was the one that would betray him. ⁶⁵ And he said, “For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father.” ⁶⁶ Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. ⁶⁷ So Jesus asked the twelve, “Do you also wish to go away?” ⁶⁸ Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. ⁶⁹ We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.”

We were all sorry to hear of the death of your beloved rector Elizabeth Felicetti. When something like this happens, each of us has to respond to it in their own way. For me, the best response is to proclaim the guarantee of eternal life God gives us in the gospel of Jesus. To that end, this morning I'd like to look at something Jesus points out in our gospel reading. After he tells the crowds that whoever eats his flesh and drinks his blood will live forever, some of his audience are grossed out. They complain about it. Jesus says, **“Does this offend you? Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before?”** He's saying that if A is offensive, B would be even more so. And little did the troubled disciples understand that B—his ascension into heaven—would really happen.

The crowds' response here illustrates something about Christianity in general—and the gospel of Christ in particular—that we have lost sight of. It's that properly understood, Christianity is offensive to human beings. Mark Twain was not a conventional churchgoer, but he was an astute observer of religion and read the Bible closely. He's quoted as saying, **“It ain't those parts of the Bible that I can't understand that bother me, it is the parts that I do understand.”**

That's basically what the troubled disciples were saying in this morning's gospel. Their problem was that they clearly understood what Jesus was saying. You can imagine them saying to each other, **“Did you hear what I heard?” “Yes. What in the world is he talking about? He wants us to eat him.”** There was no ambiguity or room for misunderstanding. Jesus had actually said that they had to eat his flesh and drink his blood in order to have life. But he follows it with a comparison that's even more outrageous than his original statement. He more or less says, **“If that offends you, how about if you see me magically transported out of this world to somewhere else?”**

If this passage were a text chain instead of a face-to-face conversation, the disciples would be replying to Jesus and one another with the “head exploding” emoji. Throughout the gospels, we see Jesus consistently blowing peoples' minds with what he says and how he behaves. He tells Nicodemus you can't see the kingdom of God unless you have been born again. (John 3:3) He tells the young rich man that he should sell everything he has in order to follow him. (Matthew 19:21) He drives the merchants out of the temple with a whip. (John 2:15) And he calls Peter “Satan” for objecting to the idea that he, Jesus, has to be killed. (Matthew

16:23) In our day we make much of whether or not what you say is politically correct, but for the people who first heard Jesus, it was a case of being culturally and religiously correct. And Jesus wasn't.

And he still isn't. But we've heard his words so often that the really shocking content of what he's saying passes us by. Some commentators, wrongly in my opinion, believe Jesus' words here about eating his flesh and drinking his blood are about the Eucharist. What Jesus says here obviously has implications about our weekly meal of bread and wine, but that's not what offended the original hearers. For them, this wasn't a *eucharistic* saying—it was a *cannibalistic* saying. And indeed, part of the misinformation campaign waged against the earliest Christians was that they practiced cannibalism in their weekly feasts. We have to face the fact: what Jesus says here is offensive to the point that many of the people who had gone to great trouble to get out into the country around Lake Galilee to hear him were grossed out and left.

But even if we mistake Jesus' words here as a preview of our Eucharist, we should be offended at what the Eucharist presents to us and to the universe. In Paul's words from 1 Corinthians 11:25, "**As often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.**" The Lord's death for our sins is offensive. It's the greatest injustice ever perpetrated by the human race. The perfect, sinless Son of God himself was put to death in the most barbaric way possible by people motivated by self-preservation, self-righteousness, and the lust for power. Just thinking about that is off-putting to lots of people.

But let me suggest to you that every death is offensive. It's an offense against God and humanity. Of course we know of older folks who have suffered for years and are finally released from their suffering by death. But the fact that human disease and suffering exist is itself an affront to God because human beings are the crown of God's creation. We are created in his image to share in his divine life, his eternal bliss and glory and unspeakable love and joy. We are created for relationship with one another. But all that is cruelly destroyed because death is in this world.

But that is precisely and exactly why God sent Jesus—to die in our place on that cross in order to defeat death for all who believe in him. To eat his flesh and drink his blood means to swallow whole the entirety of what God has done for us in Jesus. Though we broke God's world, in Jesus God has more than fixed it. In Jesus he has established the sure beginning of an entirely new creation populated with his own children. He has bought us back from the world, the flesh, and the

devil. **“In Christ [he has] brought us out of error into truth, out of sin into righteousness, out of death into life.”**

But people find even this good news offensive. It’s offensive to our self-righteousness. We think we can please God without his help. It’s offensive to our autonomy. Inside every adult human being is a little toddler crying, “You’re not the boss of me!” Like the troubled disciples who went home rather than hear what Jesus had to say, they look to other ways to meet their needs for peace or security or significance. And of course, there is no end to the self-help or wellness or self-care schemes out there today, all of which promise a new you.

But here we are, at St. David’s this morning. What are we going to do in the face of the massive outrage of Elizabeth’s death? She was young, vibrant, intelligent, cultured, funny, talented, caring and dedicated—and yet taken away from us by the cruelty of cancer.

Let’s look at what the word of God is telling us. In our Old Testament lesson we see Joshua near the end of his life basically outlining his program as Israel’s leader. He gives his people a choice: they can either follow the gods of the moment, or the crisis or the month, or they can follow the Lord God Almighty, Creator of Heaven and Earth. Joshua makes clear what he’s going to do. **“As for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.”**

And Jesus, after seeing people leaving, asks the disciples what they’re going to do. Peter replies for all of them: **“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.”**

That’s who Jesus is—the Holy One of God. Elizabeth believed in him with all her heart. She ate his flesh and drank his blood, and he has taken her to himself. So let’s do the same. Let’s take Jesus at his word and put away all the false ideas and seductive escape mechanisms that would distract us from putting our whole trust in his grace and love. To paraphrase Peter, to whom else can we go?

Let us pray.