

Once again, we're in the 6<sup>th</sup> chapter of John's Gospel, with Jesus and his many, many followers after the feeding of the 5,000; Jesus has crossed the Sea of Galilee and the followers all have subsequently tracked him down to ask more questions in order to find out how Jesus could further serve their needs. He has spoken a great deal about the bread of heaven, identifies himself the bread of life, and (to their first century minds) now encourages them to participate in cannibalism. "Eat of my flesh, drink of my blood."

Anything to do with the body was more or less abhorrent to the people of this culture. The natural bio-chemistry and healthy functioning of the human body was deemed shameful and gross, causing one to be in nearly constant need of ritual cleansing. The mere thought of consuming a corpse (the most unclean object in all of creation) was scandalous, profane ... a sacrilege.

Unsurprisingly, these followers express a sense of shock at such a bold suggestion. Our translation misses the mark a bit in Jesus' retort – in this translation he asks, 'does this offend you?' But the Greek has Jesus ask them, "does this scandalize you?!?" There is a nuance of shame mixed with anger that the word 'scandalize' points toward.

Jesus recognizes his follower's reluctance to embrace and live into the ministry he offers, seeing their hidden agendas, their selfish aims, their hunger for physical comfort and not spiritual challenge. He recognizes they are offended ... scandalized.

I can't help but wonder at this point in the Gospel, if the human side of Jesus is fed up with the egocentricity of the rest of mankind. He's been doing everything he can to communicate his message to God's people, and he must know that he's on a journey toward the cross to give

everything he's got to embody that message ... It must be so very frustrating for him to continue to do for others what they are unwilling to do for each other... It must be so very frustrating for him to watch all those 100s (perhaps 1000s!) of people turn around and walk away.

Of course, in Jesus, the physical dimension of reality and the spiritual dimension of reality are united into one. That *Oneness* is **who he is**. How God's heart must have hurt in that moment, with all those people going their own way.

You may remember, one of the most central scriptural verses for the Jewish people in the Torah is "Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might." The Jewish people's monotheistic worldview was unique and set them apart from every other tribe and nation. Striving to honor and obey the one true God was at the very center of all they knew and believed and understood – about themselves and the rest of creation – thereby guiding every aspect of how they navigated the changes and chances of their common life.

Paul was also product of this theological worldview. When he writes of spiritual warfare, he argues that the battles here on earth are nothing compared to the spiritual battles we must fight.

However (because this passage from Ephesians has been interpreted in some counterproductive ways) I think it's important to remember that (1) Paul's letter to the Ephesians was not written to a person, but to a people. A community whose core identity was their faith. [Side note: Around the time of Paul's letters, many devout Jews wore phylacteries ... little boxes in which verses like the one I mentioned a moment ago were written down and folded up, then tied onto the backs of one's hands or on their foreheads. These phylacteries were worn as reminders of who they were and what they were about, a sort of spiritual armor, to keep temptation at bay.] (2) It may also be helpful to remember that faith

as a *personal* expression is a relatively new phenomenon. Throughout the ages, faith was a *communal* identity and a *communal* activity.

From Paul's perspective, the battles that must be fought are to be fought as a body of believers, as the Body of Christ. The 'warfare' as Paul refers to it, was not a personal battle of one's own struggles between right/wrong, good/evil ... but rather the struggles of God's people, as a body of believers, to love God and love neighbor just as the Torah told them to, and just as Jesus reminded them of. The battle of faith is not to blindly and recklessly believe 'God will protect me and mine if I just believe' ...

Rather the battle of faith is about the Body of Christ trusting (1) that God is the God of all things, (2) that Jesus is present in and through the joys and struggles our community faces, and (3) that we have an Advocate with the Father who lifts us up and holds us together. As we heard a few weeks ago from earlier in this chapter of John's Gospel, when the followers asked Jesus what they must do to perform the works of God, he responded, "This is the work of God: that you believe in him whom God has sent."<sup>1</sup> That work of faith is hard, because it means that it is to be lived out in ways that glorify God, not ourselves ... it means we build up the Body of Christ, not our own ego and selfish agendas. It means we must nourish ourselves with the soul food of bread and wine, the body and blood of the incarnate God, so that we may be the change we pray to see in the world. ***That*** is the battle Paul was talking about.

My elementary health teacher taught me well: we are what we eat. To borrow some of Paul's imagery, when we eat of the sacrifice of Jesus, when we drink of the selflessness of our Lord, we put on the armor of Light in a world that seems hellbent on darkness. When we love our neighbors as ourselves, we boldly wear the belt of truth around our waists. When we commit to being our brothers' keeper, we bear the

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<sup>1</sup> John 6:29

breastplate of righteousness. When we walk a mile in another's shoes, we equip ourselves to proclaim the gospel of peace.

Jesus, unsurprisingly, stays the course when faced with a community that does not desire to partake of the bread of life or participate in the building up of God's kingdom. He remains attuned to his higher nature. He continues to embody the Golden Rule. He continues to be the change God hopes to see in the world.

There are a lot of distractions and demands on our time / energy / focus these days. Let us not lose sight of our identity as children of God and followers of The Way.

Jesus said, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

And to do these things is nothing less than offensive. Following in the Way of Jesus goes against everything we were brought up to believe about our personal autonomy, our liberty, our capitalist economy ... It goes against our western values self-determination, our notions of social Darwinism. *The Gospel of Jesus Christ is unapologetically scandalous to these ‘sensibilities.’*

The individual's choice to follow in the Way of Jesus, simply put, isn't about me and it isn't about you. It's about everybody else.

As we do each morning when we wake, you and I, like the followers of Jesus, have a choice: are we going to choose to go our own way, looking in all the wrong places for what will feed our souls, or do we nourish ourselves with the bread of life, taking up that shield of faith and actively choosing to follow where he leads?

In the words of the Old Testament prophet Joshua, “Revere the Lord, and serve God in sincerity and in faithfulness ... 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.”

May our response be, “as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.”