

There is Only Christ

Melissa Partain Moore

John 6:52-71 Translation from *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* by Frederick Dale Bruner

(Context: Jesus just declared himself the bread of life, saying that only by eating his flesh and drinking his blood can people know God, because he is God).

Then the Judeans were arguing with one another, saying, "How in the world can this fellow give us his flesh to eat? Please!" So Jesus said to them, "Amen, amen, I want to tell you something very important: unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in yourselves. Indeed, the person who is feasting on my flesh and drinking down my blood has deep, lasting Life, and I will raise that person up on the last day. You see, my flesh is the real food, and my blood is the real drink. The person who is feasting on my flesh and drinking down my blood is the very person who is making a home with me, and I am making my home with that person, too. In the same way that the living Father sent me, and I am alive because of my relation with the Father, so also the individual who is feasting on me will be alive because of this simple relation to me. Here is the Bread Who Came Down out of Heaven -- it is not like the bread the ancestors ate and died. The individual feasting on this very Bread will live forever." He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum.

Then many of Jesus' own disciples who heard him said, "This is a very hard message to take. Who can really listen to it?" But Jesus, sensing in himself that even his own disciples were grumbling about his message, said to them, "Does what I am saying offend you? Then what will you do when you see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? The Spirit is the Life-giving reality; the flesh (unaided human nature) is absolutely useless. The words that I have spoken to you are Spirit and are Life. But there are some of you who are not believing at all." (You see, Jesus had known from the beginning that there are some people who are not believing and that there is one person in particular who is even going to turn him in.) Then he was adding, "That's why I have told you that no one can ever come to me unless this coming shall have been given to that person by my Father." At this point, many of his disciples came out from behind him and never walked around with him again.

So Jesus said to the twelve, "You don't want to go away too, do you?" Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You alone have the words of deep, lasting Life, and we have come to believe and so to know that you are the Holy One of God," Jesus replied to them, "Didn't I choose you Twelve? And yet one of you is a very devil." He was talking about Judas, son of Simon Iscariot. You see, Judas was just about to hand Jesus over. And yet he was one of the Twelve.

The Gospel according to Jesus is gross, offensive, and hard to believe. Because it's profoundly simple: to be able to live a true life, like the life that God lives, all we have to do is believe that God showed up in flesh and blood and then eat that godly flesh and blood. We literally just have to allow ourselves to be fed by God.

But in its simplicity, this gospel demands everything. We are, after all, what we eat. Jesus says that we build our homes in him when we take him in, we become like him. He influences us. He drags us into his weird, upside-down way of doing life, where lives are gained by laying them down, and riches are stored up by giving them away, and enemies are triumphed over by giving them our shirt when they take our coat. He tells us that we find the king of the universe not in the rich and famous and powerful, but in the poor, and hungry, and broken. In Jesus' strange world, shepherds and women are to be believed, and the sick are to be healed, not avoided. In the end, it's the religious and

civil structure of the day that brings Jesus down. And of course it was. They had the most to lose from this scandalous gospel.

The people who have power (and by the way, that's you and me in this scenario), don't want God to come down to us like we're some sort of weak idiots who can't figure out how to live successfully on our own. We want to ascend to God. We're smart enough. We have enough money. We've got grit and determination and strength and beauty. We know how to invest and who to vote for so our futures and our way of life is secure. We think we have this life thing down pretty well.

But just below the surface, we are terrified. If we stop for a second, we are panicked by the realization that it can all come crumbling down. So we do everything we can to make things MAKE SENSE. We build a tidy, sanitary God who is distant but benevolent, who doesn't care about our day-to-day, who likes us if we do the right stuff (as defined, conveniently, by us) and doesn't like us if we step out of the line.

We build a tidy, sanitary world where if something bad happens to someone it's because they were asking for it. We build a tidy, sanitary economic structure where we can enjoy nearly anything we want at the click of a button, never having to see how the people who made that product live or how the animals who became that meal were treated. We build a million different entertainment outlets so we can escape when life gets too real - when we start to sense that maybe we don't know what we're doing after all.

Jesus says we're more fragile than we know. Human ingenuity can do a lot. It can cure polio. It can rebuild after a natural disaster. It can kidnap hundreds of girls from their school, rape them, and force them into marriage because an educated woman is evil in its eyes. It can create weapons, allow us to bomb school busses and hospitals from the comfort of our own country. It can cover up decades of sexually predatory behavior by priests because the institution is more important than the children it's destroyed. It can create financial, physical, and emotional freedom for former sex slaves through community and challenging, skill-creating work. Human ingenuity can build us up so high. And it can drag us to the edge of hell itself. But it cannot make us gods. It cannot connect us to the life we are meant to build our home in.

So when Peter, after hearing Jesus say this absolutely bonkers truth that anyone who wants genuine life has to eat God, did not take lightly Jesus' question. He wasn't answering out of naivete or fear. He wasn't star-struck. He was watching the religious structure he was born into - the one he knew inside and out - the one he had built his home in, crumble around him. He saw how his faith had been turned into an instrument of control by priests who thought they were honoring God and keeping the law. He saw the Romans come in and promise peace and prosperity as they taxed people out of house and home and brought war to their doors. He saw people buy into these systems, believing the lies they were fed. He saw people alienate each other based on race, and health, and gender; shriveling into calloused, cold shadows of who they could have been. Moments prior, just before Jesus asked him this question, he saw people get up and leave, going back to their old ways, preferring the lies of a broken system to the idea that God would stoop so low as to feed himself to us, much less the idea that we would need him to do this.

Peter knew that Jesus' gospel is disturbing, offensive, impossible to believe. And yet, he says, it's all we've got. Nothing else works. Nothing else takes us outside of ourselves. So, who else can we go to? Where else can we find the words of life itself?

The more we explore the other options, the more we learn that all these other tidy, sanitary offerings are lies. Power doesn't last. Beauty doesn't last. Human justice perpetuates the cycle of war and rape and destruction. Hiding from each other makes us small, mutated versions of ourselves. Trying to control each other does the same thing. Only one thing delivers what it promises. And it's base and strange and humiliating and a lot to swallow. Yet here we are. Where else can we go? Who else holds the words of life? Who else can connect us to that life?

Only Jesus, the stumbling block to human arrogance that he is, can swallow up our death in his life. But it requires of him a completely different way of succeeding. The life Jesus wins for us is not sanitary or tidy. It doesn't play by our rules, accepting the people we accept and destroying the people we want destroyed. It bypasses our failed systems and carves out a new path entirely. Because, to offer life to us, Jesus must first die. Christ came face-to-face with the depths of the capacity of human ingenuity. Struck down by powerful people who refused to relinquish control at any cost, he was dragged outside the city, away from the temple, beyond the places where people think they are so strong and so capable. In the end, Jesus gives himself as the victim of powerful men, murdered on a hill next to a trash heap. But who else can we go to? The men who killed him? They're dead. The people who chanted for his death? They're gone. The nails that pierced him? Turned to dust. Only Jesus remains. Only Jesus stared down the barrel of human ingenuity, and lives to lead us through a better way, his way.

Though Jesus alone speaks the words of true life, his words are not enough. Because without the Spirit, his words are impossible to follow. His path to life is strange and challenging. It requires that we take ourselves out of the center of our worlds. It requires that we stop trying to build our ladders up to God and instead, in humility, let him feed us. It requires that we wrap up our identity in Christ, and, in so doing, discover who we really are. To live, we need God within us, connecting us with the very author of love and life. Proximity is not enough. Jesus' followers had proximity, and many of them left, one betrayed him into the hands of the people who would kill him.

We need to build our homes in Christ, in the one place that cannot be destroyed. Everything else we build will eventually get torn down. Only Jesus is secure. But we're fickle. Each one of us is a little bit Peter and a little bit Judas. A little bit faithful, but scared, and a little bit wondering if this is all too good to be true. But where we are fickle, Christ isn't. In the meal of his body and blood, he does not meet us in judgment. He meets us in patience, mercy, and gentleness. He gives us his very life.

Each one of us needs the bread Christ offers. Each one of us needs the nourishment only he can give. And we need it again and again and again. So we take in his words, yes. But we also take in his body and his blood. Because only his body and blood can transform us, body and soul. So Jesus meets us, each one of us, in this small meal, and reminds us that there is nowhere else we can go to come alive. There is only Christ.

Melissa Partain Moore serves in a local church and a publishing company.

