

SERMON OF AUGUST 15, 2021 – FASHBAUGH

OUTRAGEOUS CLAIMS

John 6: 51-59; Leviticus 7: 1-10; Romans 12: 1-3

In verse 66 of *John*, Chapter Six – a few verses following this morning’s reading – we’re told that “many of [Jesus’s] disciples turned back and no longer went about with Him.” A note in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* offers the explanation the “Jesus’s emphasis on spiritual transformation rather than on political concerns alone causes the crowd to lose interest in Him” (3rd ed., NT 159). We may suppose that a considerable number of people, before what Jesus says in our reading, constituted a “crowd” that had followed Jesus as “disciples” – as *devotees*, we might say. It may be that they were principally motivated by a desire for a political leader – probably one who would want to be installed as the King of Israel. In an earlier verse of Chapter Six, immediately following Jesus’s feeding of the five-thousand, we’re told that “when Jesus realized that [the people he had fed] were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself” (6:15). Encapsulation of Jesus’s rejection of the idea that he should be thought of as a “son of David” – that is, as one who might claim kingship over Israel by virtue of his having descended, in a technical sense, from King David – is in the three synoptic gospels (*Mark 12: 35-37; Matthew 22: 41-46; Luke 20: 41-44*), where Jesus points out that in Psalm 110 David refers to the divinely – ordained ruler, the anointed one, as “Lord,” thereby providing evidence that the Lord, or “Messiah,” could not be “the Son of David.”

Though there were many who wanted a “savior” who would raise an army, drive the hated Romans out of Israel, and assume a royal throne, Jesus had come into human life, not to restore a political entity called “Israel,” but to present all of humanity with an invitation to God’s Kingdom. Naturally, there were “sunshine followers” of Jesus who were disappointed when they finally realized what Jesus was doing. However, in our reading this morning and in a passage of Chapter Six preceding it, Jesus makes claims that go beyond causing disappointment among people who had thought that they might commit themselves to discipleship. Jesus makes a couple claims, outrageous claims, that would cause them to be, in fact, repulsed by the holy man from Nazareth.

I’m not thinking of the repulsion a woman that I knew felt when the Eucharist was celebrated. The idea of eating the flesh and drinking the blood of Jesus – she said it made her feel a bit sick. Nevertheless, she didn’t stay away from church on Communion Sundays. She was a Christian, after all; and Jesus *did* say, as we’ve read this morning, “Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.” The woman I’m remembering knew that Jesus was using symbolism in some sense here, of course – in the sense, perhaps, that as Christians we are expected to *internalize* the spirit and truth manifested in the life of Jesus; but she could not completely dismiss the literalism of her imagination.

In the repulsion experienced by those who first heard what Jesus said about eating his flesh and drinking his blood and then decided to leave him there was, as well, a literal element – a *graphic* element, we might say. Jewish people of that time witnessed animal sacrifices regularly. What Jesus said would have prompted those of his original audience to imagine a man being sacrificed on an altar. But the *meaning* of the evoked imagery, disturbing as that imagery in itself would have been, would have bothered even more those who would choose to leave Jesus.

Our gospel reading suggests that true disciples of Jesus, those who will have actual life in them, will be like priests – who are entitled to eat, where a ritual of sacrifice is performed for the purpose of atonement, a portion of a sacrificed animal. Our reading this morning from *Leviticus* presents this feature of guilt - and sin – offering protocol. In fact, “sons of Aaron” – that is, priests – and priests’ assistants, Levites, derived their sustenance, to a great extent, from portions of sacrifices – in addition to meat, portions of grain and wine. Jesus, then, not

only compares himself, by implication, to an animal that will be sacrificed, he suggests that those who truly believe in him will be like priests. In a paradoxical way, believers will in fact perform the sacrifice, since their devotion to Jesus will supply religious authorities with a rationale for arranging for his death. If Jesus were without followers, Temple priests and others in the priestly class would ignore him. Jesus's measure of success in winning a good many hearts and minds – which we commemorate every Palm Sunday, notwithstanding the rejection of Jesus by “sunshine followers” in today's reading – would put our Lord on the cross. And then the true followers of Jesus, like priests benefiting from guilt – and sin – sacrifices, would benefit from Jesus's death in that it would lead to the Resurrection and the subsequent formation of, under the particular influence of the most ardent followers, “the Twelve,” a new form of Judaism.

Those twelve, the ones we automatically think of when we see reference to “the disciples,” could not see, of course, on the day represented in our gospel reading, all that would eventuate. Like those who decided to leave Jesus, in fact, they may have experienced shock and dismay. We may hear resigned, subdued acceptance of the unknown in Peter's response, in the gospel passage immediately following today's reading, to Jesus's question, “Do you also wish to go away?” Peter replies, “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.” (*John* 6: 67-68). Peter probably does not understand what his master has meant with his talk about eating his flesh and drinking his blood; however, Peter and the others who decide to stay with Jesus do understand that a relationship with God such as their forefathers relied upon is no longer the reality. Though uncertain about the future, they would rely on Jesus's guidance.

In his telling those who would be his loyal followers what they must do to have true life Jesus compounds the transgression of saying that they must assume the priests' prerogative of eating a portion of a being offered as a sacrifice by saying, also, that they must drink the blood. In our reading from *Leviticus* this morning, the proper use of a sacrificed animal's blood is indicated, where we read that “[priests] shall slaughter the guilt offering, and its blood shall be dashed against all sides of the altar.” Later in *Leviticus* the functionality, we might call it, of a sacrificed animal's blood is explained through a representation of (as all rules in the book are represented) the voice of God: (If anyone of the house of Israel or of the aliens who reside among them partakes of any blood, I will set my face against that person who partakes of blood, and will cut that person off from the people. For the life of the flesh is in the blood; and I have given it to you for making atonement for your lives on the altar; for, as life, it is the blood that makes atonement” (17: 10-11). To properly perform the ritual of a sacrificial offering, priests do not take a portion of the animal's blood for any personal use that we might imagine; rather, they collect it in a basin and throw it against the altar. What Jesus says in comparing his blood to that of a sacrificial animal seems in bold, outrageous defiance of God as God is represented in *Leviticus*. He tells those who would be his true disciples that “those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.” We may be immediately ready to “translate” what must be symbolic language into its meaning – say, that true disciples of Christ must internalize Christ's regard for humanity and Christ's spiritually intimate relationship with God – as – Father; but such readiness would not be in the sensibilities of those who first heard Jesus's discourse as presented in this morning's reading from the *Gospel of John*. For many, Jesus expressed himself in deeply profane, outrageous terms. More to the point: He declared a concept that would overturn the centuries – old religious practice of sacrifice. Truly loyal devotees of Christ would not need the mediating offices of priests and the killing of animals to relieve them of guilt and to seek God's favor. They would recognize the sacrifice to end all sacrifices in the death of Jesus and receive from Jesus the gift of perpetually renewable favor in the eyes of God. The implicit claim of Jesus that the traditional institution of the sacrificial system could be abandoned was, indeed, outrageous.

Equally outrageous was, what may be considered a related claim in Jesus's discourse under our review this morning, the declaration that steadfast followers were the new "chosen people." In a passage previous to the one we've read this morning, Jesus says, "No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me" (6:44). It may be difficult for us to appreciate how at odds with traditional Judaic thought Jesus's statement would have sounded to an original audience. In a continuation of the discourse, in a passage of it immediately following today's reading, Jesus repeats the claim, though in a slightly different way, saying, "No one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father" (6: 65). Taken together, the two statements about how one comes to be an actual disciple of Jesus tell us that, first, God calls one into fellowship with Jesus and then, second, depending upon how one has responded to the call and all that it means, God accepts or rejects a bid for lasting fellowship. In passing, we might note that Jesus presents here, possibly, the solution to the problem of understanding election, or predestination. But the observation we want to focus on this morning is that Jesus – in his *John*, Chapter Six discourse – offers an antiestablishmentarian, personalized relationship between the believer and God. In traditional Judaism, the relationship was wedded to cultural ties: Belief that God chose an entire society for instruction and favor or disfavor and a regimen for worship and petition that depended upon a closed sub-society, the base or home of which was a centralized place of worship – the hereditarily-determined cohort of priests at the Temple in Jerusalem. We might notice that by the time the *Gospel of John* was written, late in the First Century, the Temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed by the Romans and that evangelism among Gentiles and assorted Jewish communities all around the Mediterranean Sea and beyond, appealing with pointed force to individuals within those groups through use of baptism, was well underway.

In our reading from *Romans* this morning, Paul, the pre-eminent evangelist, urges sacrifice of our own flesh upon us, saying, "I appeal to you ...brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. As brothers and sisters who have answered God's calling of us into fellowship with Christ, we follow the lead of Christ and offer ourselves, as faithful workers and individual spiritual travelers, to the Creator of us all.