

Sermon: John 6:56-69 - Bishop Michael J. Pryse, Eastern

Synod

Dear friends in Christ. It's a privilege to be with you as a part of this morning's worship and to be able to give your dear pastor some much welcome relief. Our rostered ministers have been doing such a wonderful job over the course of the past year and a half. But it's hard work and we need to do everything we can to give them our encouragement and support and I'm glad to be able to help in this small way.

In today's epistle and Gospel lessons we are provided with some incredibly rich and evocative images of what it means to live a Christian life. They are also challenging images that have been understood in different ways through the church's history.

Today's epistle from Paul's letter to the Ephesians reads as follows. "Therefore, take up the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of

righteousness. As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace.

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. Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.”

I must confess that I find the martial, militarized language of this text difficult. It may be that I have been overly sensitized by my summer’s reading of the full five volume — 5000 plus pages — Game of Thrones series. As fun as it’s been, I’ve pretty much had my fill of breastplates, helms, swords and shields! But I am also quite aware of the destructive ways in which Christian people have seen the life of discipleship through militaristic lenses. The images of battle and conquest have been used by Christians to engage in evil acts that are completely at odds with the Gospel of Jesus, the Prince of Peace. As such, we need to be extremely careful in how we read and express such imagery.

I am heartened, however, that the passage is framed with the counsel that we arm ourselves with whatever is necessary to proclaim “the Gospel of Peace.” That is the real point here! And although the imagery used is all about arming for violent battle, the real strength that is advocated is not the might of armies, but rather the world-reconciling power of the Prince of Peace who himself was the victim of a violent and oppressive regime. Yes, evil exists. And yes, we do need to combat evil. But we do so by arming ourselves, not with weapons, but with the virtues of righteousness, peace, faith and the Word of God.

Hence, I find it helpful to read this Ephesians passage alongside other discipleship descriptions employed by Paul, such as this passage from his letter to the Colossians where he writes, “As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also

must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.”

Today’s Gospel, likewise, holds a few theological pitfalls of which we need to be careful. This is now our fifth and final Sunday dwelling within John, chapter six. For four of those we have been moving our way through Jesus’ “bread of life discourse” at the synagogue in Capernaum.

For most of us, the phrase “bread of life” is well known and often used in our churchly discourse; almost casually! But that was not the case for Jesus’ listeners in this passage. For many it was deeply offensive! We read that the people complained and grumbled. “This is difficult! Who can accept it?” Many simply turned and walked away.

Have you ever considered the possibility that Jesus might well have preached more people out of the kingdom than into it? For some who walked away that day, I suspect that they could not consider anything other than a quite literal interpretation of Jesus’ words, “Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his

blood, you have no life in you.” “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” This is cannibalism; this is a grotesque abomination.

To which some of us might respond, but wait a minute; this is clearly a reference to the eucharist. Jesus is speaking of his presence in the Holy Communion. But if that’s really the case, I don’t know how Jesus could have expected his listener’s to “get it.” The last supper, the event which Christians subsequently viewed as the first eucharist, the first Holy Communion, hadn’t yet occurred. The first record of a liturgical re-enactments of that event, in something resembling what we call Holy Communion, is found in First Corinthians which wasn’t written until around 55 years after Jesus’ death.

Ah, but Bishop! You and I both know that the Gospel of John was probably written between 90 and 100 years after Jesus’ death. Its authors would have been a part of a eucharistic community that was conversant with using these images in this way. Maybe they were putting words in Jesus’ mouth or perhaps phrasing them in such a way as to affirm their own churchly

practices and theological constructs. Perhaps; and there are some scholars who would support that particular interpretation

But when I look at the John 6 discourse in the context of the whole book – the whole Gospel of John – when I look to a broad range of biblical scholars, I come to a different conclusion. I think what Jesus is really talking about here is incarnation – the Word – the logos – about God entering into the life of God’s own creation and becoming flesh. I also think many of Jesus’ listeners would have heard him saying as such and it was that – that earth shattering theological construct — that they found to be, at worst, offensive, and at best, impossible to believe!

I think that it was — and still is — almost unimaginable that God so loved the world – so loved God’s creation – that God chooses to enter into that world – certainly in the person of Jesus of Nazareth - but also through Jesus into us — into God’s beloved creation — so that we might have true and lasting life and have it abundantly.

Luther Seminary theologian Karoline Lewis describes it this way. “This is truth. Because at the end of the day, life, real life, life lived, abundant life, is hard to fathom, hard to accept, hard to imagine that it could be yours. Judas’s betrayal that is referenced at the end of chapter 6, is fundamentally a rejection of relationship but it is also an unwillingness to receive life beyond measure, an inability to accept that abundant life could be true, a reluctance to envision, to dream, to picture that when God said God loves the world that it actually meant him — and means you.” That’s powerful!

And it is that relationship, as intimate and nourishing as eating and drinking can be – God, in Christ, entering into our lives, our existence, our being — that gives us the will and the capacity to clothe and arm ourselves in the way Paul describes to the Ephesians and the Colossians.

Our Gospel lesson today concludes with Jesus asking a question to his disciples. "Do you also wish to go away?" Simon Peter answered him, "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."

May Peter's response be our response. AMEN