

Sermon Notes – August 25, 2024
The Holy Gospel of St. John 6: 56-69
Peace Lutheran Church
“To Whom Shall We Go?”

There's a scene in the epic film *“Gandhi”* where an ally of Gandhi's cause, Anglican priest Charles Andrews, climbs atop a train in rural India and sits on the train's roof because the cars are full. Recognizing his clerical attire, a nearby passenger asks, “Are you a Christian, Sahib?” Priest Charles nods, “Yes, yes, I'm a Christian.” Yet another man excitedly shares, “I know a Christian.” As the priest nods politely, the man continues. “This Christian I know - she drinks blood.” Immediately Charles is aghast, but as the passenger explains, “...The blood of Christ – she drinks it every Sunday!” Priest Charles' face changes dramatically.

Father Charles Andrew's confusion and head-smacking realization demonstrate the way the established church has taken some of the power out of the Eucharist. Drink blood? The horror! You're a vampire! But ...drink the blood of Christ? Well now, that is an entirely different matter. Now one is very holy, very proper, even civilized. That not so-subtle difference is often lost on us, as we have institutionalized, ritualized, and sanitized the practice of the sacred Eucharist.

When denominations debate the intricacies of transubstantiation (the substance of bread and wine transform into Christ's blood and body) versus real presence (Christ is present at the Eucharist) versus memorial (the bread and wine are symbolic representations of the body and blood of Christ), seldom is the intention of the plain language of eating body and drinking blood mentioned. One of my favorite pastoral responsibilities is first communion in confirmation classes. I start with the obvious; “Is this weird ...to talk about Jesus' flesh and blood?” Young people become engaged immediately when that elephant in the room is acknowledged.

Today's gospel text comes well before the events of the Last Supper, and John is the only gospel that doesn't include the words of institution. So we are forced to deal with this offensive saying all on its own, without the context of the Lord's supper. Is it even possible to talk about consuming Jesus' flesh and blood without immediately speaking of the Eucharist? If it is, this is the passage into that very possibility. Earlier in John we have the “bread of life” discourse, but that is a passage with much less kickback for being offensive. The phrasing there is easily read as coming to Jesus for the bread. Here we have a direct call to take a bite out of Jesus Himself!

The issue of being offensive seems somewhat obvious on its face. We don't have to be experts on first-century cultures to imagine how anyone would be offended by a religious leader suggesting something as literally visceral. It would be shocking in a modern, completely religious setting. Now add even a hint of purity culture, and the offensiveness of this expression comes as no surprise. However, much life “born from above” from John 3, we can be safe in pursuing the more metaphorical intent behind Jesus' words. There we will find the true offense to our ears; the idea that we need to

depend on anyone but ourselves. Whether literal or metaphorical, eating someone's flesh and blood is an act of humility. Here Jesus offers life through Him. But what if I am thoroughly convinced I don't need anything from anyone, including Jesus? The challenge, the offense to us is to see ourselves as needing to be fed!