

DIFFICULT TEACHING
Sermon for Pentecost 13B-Jn 16:56-69
LPC, 8/23/15

One of my Facebook friends this week posted a New York Times column from 2010 by Jeffrey McDonald, which posited that the reason for widespread clergy burnout is that congregations are demanding the impossible from their spiritual leaders. McDonald says that people want to be soothed and entertained at church.

The problem is that solace and entertainment are not the core message of any faith system. Yet churchgoers vote with their feet and with their pocketbooks, and if they are not being adequately comforted and entertained they switch churches or stop going to church altogether. To keep their jobs clergy are giving congregations what they want, McDonald says, but at great personal cost because to do so goes against their own consciences and beliefs.

McDonald says, “As religion becomes a consumer experience, the clergy become more unhappy and unhealthy.” He goes on to say, “When they’re being true to their calling, pastors urge Christians to do the hard work of reconciliation with one another before receiving communion. They lead people to share in the suffering of others, including people they would rather ignore...”

I will say in response that here at Lawrencefield I have not felt the need to compromise my conscience in order to please you and keep my job, but I know this kind of thing goes on, and indeed, has happened to some of my colleagues.

Part of the difficulty is that people are correct in their assumption that Christianity legitimately offers comfort... to the oppressed. “‘Comfort, comfort ye, my people,’ saith our God.” “Come unto me, all ye that travail and are heavy-laden, and I will refresh you,” says Jesus. The poor, the sick, the disenfranchised flocked to Jesus, because he did offer them relief, and Jesus still offers relief to the suffering, as I’m sure many of us here can testify from first-hand experience.

What Jesus clearly does not offer is endorsement for the already comfortable, unless they are already about building the kingdom of God. And this makes following Jesus difficult some of the time. There’s no whitewashing this. Christianity is not rubber-stamp approval of the way people are already living, and that includes the way professed Christians are already living.

If it’s any comfort (there’s that word again!) things have always been this way, as this morning’s Gospel lesson from John attests. Here Jesus is again talking about himself, in his own flesh and blood, being the bread of eternal life. And people’s response is, “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?” Many erstwhile disciples drift away, because Jesus’ teaching is just too hard to understand, never mind execute.

Let’s make no bones about it. Eating the flesh of Jesus and drinking his blood means more than taking communion. It means taking Jesus’ teaching to heart. It means living the Jesus way: loving, giving, forgiving, feeding, healing. It means doing these things for and with some people we would normally find unattractive. It means unselfishness, peacefulness, equanimity,

generosity, kindness, non-competitiveness, sharing with and caring for people you don't even know, not just your own family and friends, your socio-economic group and your political allies. This is deeply counter-cultural, and so it is difficult. But you can't expect to come to church to hear the Gospel preached and not hear this. Eat his flesh and drink his blood means to be like him. And this teaching is difficult.

But it is also the only sustainable way to live. Without eating the flesh of Jesus, which means following the Jesus way of life, we will eat up ourselves, eat up each other, and eat up the world. We can look around the world and see this going on: people not only beating each other up but eating each other up. This is not sustainable. This is the way of death. The Jesus way, by contrast, is the way of life.

It doesn't do to say, I'm not the one shooting up a McDonald's, or engaging in human trafficking, or beheading people for minor offenses. I'm not the one wasting government dollars or denying people a living wage. Every feeling of self-righteousness, every twinge of contempt, every self-justification, and every outburst of rage fuels the divisive, anti-Christian miasma that engulfs our society and our world.

The situation would be hopeless, but for the words of eternal life which are ours for the taking from Jesus Christ. There is no one else to turn to except for the Almighty God who Godself not only forgives our self-righteousness, contempt, self-justification and rage, but empowers us, if we let God, to live the Jesus life of loving, giving, forgiving, feeding and healing.

And it may not be easy. If you can't accept this, you are free to leave. But if you want to live, and live abundantly, you will stay and listen and take and eat and follow, because ultimately this is the only way to live.

To illustrate the occasional difficulty of following Jesus, I've heard a variation on the old "Footprints in the Sand" poem, where Jesus shows a person his life as a line of footprints. You know this old chestnut: in most places there are two rows of prints, showing that Jesus has accompanied the person through life, but in the difficult places there's only one row. The person protests, "Master, why did you abandon me in my hour of need?" and Jesus says, "My beloved child, that is where I carried you."

Nice Hallmark moment. The newer version is one I personally can identify with better. In this one, Jesus says, "Where there's one row of prints, that is where I carried you. Where the sand is really messed up is where I had to take you kicking and screaming."

Yes, the teaching can be difficult. No, we can't always expect solace and entertainment from God, in the same way that we can't always expect approval from a loving parent when we've not done our best work. But Jesus really does have the words of eternal life.