

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

THE REASONING OF FAITH

John 6:56-69

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Analysis by Steven C. Kuhl

56Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. 57Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. 58This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever.” 59He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum.

60When many of his disciples heard it, they said, “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?” 61But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, “Does this offend you? 62Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? 63It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. 64But among you there are some who do not believe.” For Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe, and who was the one that would betray him. 65And he said, “For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father.”

66Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. 67So Jesus asked the twelve, “Do you also wish to go away?” 68Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. 69We have

come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.”

DIAGNOSIS: The Reasoning of the Flesh

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *This Teaching Is Too Difficult (v. 60)*

The initial diagnosis here entails the inevitable scandal that the gospel presents to human reason, including, to rationally thinking disciples (v. 60), and the result it has of pushing people away (v. 66). It is tempting to refract the complaint of these disciples (focused on Jesus’ language of eating his flesh) through the lens of later inter-church debates on the rationality or irrationality of the “real presence” of Christ in Eucharist and leave it at that. But that, in my judgment, would obscure John’s more fundamental concern that still confronts all disciples today: Our incessant need as disciples to be seen as reasonable by the crowds before whom we bear witness. That first-century challenge is the post-modern challenge, too. The disciples who left Jesus over this difficult teaching did so because, frankly, keeping the law made much more sense to them as a way of following the will of God than trusting Jesus by participating in sacramental signs, like, baptism as a sign of new birth (cf. 3:2, 22) and the Eucharist as a sign of real, absolute dependence on Christ (cf. 6:29-30). Can these things really be the will of God? Can they really lead to eternal life? To most rationally thinking people, including, rationally thinking disciples, it seems to stretch one’s credulity.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Does This Offend You? (v. 61)*

But not only does the teaching of Jesus seem unreasonable, even more, it is “offensive”—offensive because it disturbs our core beliefs about ourselves. And what is that core belief it

disturbs? Ultimately, that “our flesh,” that is, our human nature, has the capacity to endear us to God or to achieve “eternal life” as John calls it, through the keeping of the law. The truth is, Jesus says, “our flesh is useless” (v. 63) in this regard. Indeed, as Jesus notes elsewhere, to attribute such salvific powers to our flesh is not only “to judge by human standards” (8:15), but it is a judgment that is born of “darkness,” not “light” (3:19). Even more shocking, according to Jesus, this core belief is the essence of “evil” (cf. 3:19), what the Christian tradition has called, “original sin,” because it flatly opposes the judgment God makes concerning us (cf. 8:16). For this reason, Jesus says that the “flesh,” our human nature, is diametrically opposed to “Spirit,” God’s nature. To be sure, reasonable human beings cannot imagine believing otherwise than they do. But that fact only underscores how their opposition to God is inseparably linked to their life in the flesh.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Christ Forsaking (cf. v. 66) Means God- Forsaken, Already (cf. 3:17-18)*

At the end of this text, when we read that many disciples “turn back and no longer go about with Jesus,” to what are they returning? Answer: to their original Jesus-less condition, which Jesus also described variously as, the wrath of God (3:36) and the condemnation of God (3:17-18). This God-forsaken condition is the hidden reason for death, because death is nothing other than God withdrawing his support and approval of our flesh, of our fallen human nature. True, these turn-back disciples may find this explanation even more offensive than Jesus’ earlier teaching about his flesh and blood being real food. Moreover, they may even take pride in chastising Jesus (along with the disciples who remain with him) as a kind of religious-lunatic fringe advancing some of the most unreasonable and offensive things they have ever heard. By way of response, remaining

disciples may try to counter this attack by noting Jesus' own emphatic words that rejection of him is not what brings God's condemnation; that the condition of wrath and condemnation happened way before Jesus ever arrives on the scene (3:18); that Jesus has come to reverse that condemnation (3:16-17). But, then, we are also reminded by Jesus himself that accepting his teaching and believing in him is itself altogether his Father's doing (cf. v. 65); faith is not a human achievement, it is not a work of the flesh. As a result, human reason is further scandalized and human flesh further offended that God hasn't "granted" this faith to everyone (cf. v. 65). What a mess. Disciples who remain with Jesus dare not be naïve. They, too, must live with a scandalized reason and offended flesh. Indeed, still today, the temptation to turn back to their Jesus-less condition remains the great temptation of every disciple. Therefore, Jesus' final question is still hauntingly being addressed to disciples today: "Do you also wish to go away?" (v. 67).

PROGNOSIS: The Reasoning of Faith

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *The Son of Man Ascending to Where He Was Before* (v. 62)

Truth be told, ruminations of the flesh (things like philosophical inquiry, logical discourse, and self-help advise) can never break through and change the God-forsaken, flesh-offended, reason-scandalized condition that humanity finds itself in. Only an act of God will do. And, thankfully, God has acted in a most unexpected, counterintuitive way, revealing more about himself than ever before imagined. The words John uses here in this text to describe this act of God come in cryptic words: "The Son of Man ascending to where he was before" (v. 62). The meaning entails the whole mission of Christ and might be summarized like this: God the Father in his mercy sends his Son to take on the likeness of our flesh so that in his death

and resurrection the Father may receive him back again as Spirit-and-Flesh united, as God-and-humanity reconciled. But that's not all there is to the act. For even now the Father is busy in the world acting through the Spirit to advocate on behalf of the Son in order to draw all whom he chooses, personally, in the flesh, into the divine life, or what John calls "eternal life," a life that is condemnation-conquering and death-proof. This advocacy happens under the veil of three highly unusual signs: under the sign of preaching or "testimony" (cf. 3:11; 15:20), under the sign of baptism (cf. 3:5), and under the sign of the Eucharist, which is the focus of this text. Of course, preaching, baptism and Eucharist are "signs," as John calls them, not because they are mere symbols of something far away or new requirements for the flesh to do. On the contrary, they are indicators of a real encounter with the incarnate, crucified and risen Christ who comes to take the matter of our God-forsaken condition into his own flesh. They are the signs under which the Father by the advocacy of the Spirit draws fallen humanity into the humanity of the Son and into a life-giving fellowship with God.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Granted by the Father (v. 65)*

Of course, this fellowship in the divine life is not a behind-the-scenes activity separated from us as individual persons. Truth be told, neither Jesus' one time historic incarnation nor our mere encounter with him in sacramental signs are meaningful and powerful for us until they are appropriated by them. And that appropriation Jesus calls "faith." Faith is not a doing, but a receiving, an appropriating of Jesus' work as our own. It is not an exercise of the powers of the flesh, of the human will, but a relinquishing of all such powers and a relying solely and completely on Christ as advocated by the Spirit and glorified by the Father. Faith is the work of God applied to us

(cf. 6:29). Sound easy? It is not. Indeed, it is impossible for the flesh, for our fallen human nature, to believe. That's because faith means death to the flesh and that is always offensive to the flesh. And yet, faith happens. People believe. It is not only important to note that not all the disciples turned back from following Jesus on that day outside Capernaum. It's also important to know why some continued to follow Jesus. Indeed, for John that is the question! Given the flesh-offending message of Jesus, why did any stay? Why do you stay? It has nothing to do with the powers of your flesh, but everything to do with the will God. "For this reason," says Jesus, "I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father" (see also 15:16). The great temptation of the flesh is to attribute all things to itself. But such an interpretation of faith in Christ is impossible. Faith is a gift of the Father mediated through the signs that Jesus has given and the Spirit uses. Faith, therefore, excludes any boasting in the flesh and includes all rejoicing in the Spirit.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : Reasoning Faith: To Whom Shall We Go... (v. 68)

While it is true that believing is not an act of reason, nevertheless, reasoning is an act or fruit of believing. That is, reason is divested of the weakness of the flesh and is reinvested, "born anew," by the power of faith. Just look at the reason born of faith exhibited by the believers in our text. Note Peter's response when Jesus asks those disciples who believed, "Do you also wish to go away?" He responds not with blind faith, but with reasoning faith: "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" (vv. 68-69). The claims of faith are not detached from this world but are directed quite consciously to Christ in the world, that is, to his historic death and resurrection, his tangible sacramental signs, the

fellowship of love that perdures (cf. 13:35;15:12-17). As John notes in the prologue, Jesus is the “word,” God’s *logos*, that is, reason “made flesh”; in Jesus, reason itself has “lived among us” (1:14). But there is more. Christians not only give reasons for their faith, they, also, quite consciously engage their world in all kinds of debate, giving arguments and reasons that they hope by the power of the Spirit may actually change the very nature of debate in both their civic and ecclesial contexts. Christians would never disrupt a town hall meeting to stop debate. That is both unfaithful and unreasonable. On the contrary, they would do all in their power to deepen debate, remaining open to new thoughts and new reasons as the Spirit gives them light. Moreover, they may reason in very surprising ways about healthcare or about sexuality or about when law should be compromised (or loosed) and when it should not. Christians reason this way because they know that the ultimate future of this world rests not in the demands of the law or in the things (the bread) of this world, but in the “bread of life, the “words of eternal life,” that spring from the teaching and actions of Christ in our midst. Such is the reasoning of faith.