

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

The Audacity 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: Reasoning Christ's Offer unto Death

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *This teaching is too difficult (v. 60)*

The teaching is clear. We've heard it now for several weeks, and now we hear it again: to eat the body and drink the blood of Christ is to live; not to do so is to die. As the disciples in Capernaum scrutinized this teaching of Jesus, they concluded that it doesn't stand to reason. That, after all, is what they mean by "too difficult." It is reasonable—indeed, common sense—that we live at the expense of the material world. The life-filled grain that is destroyed into bread becomes life for the body. That is the nature of food. But it is most unreasonable—indeed, sinful—to think that we should have life at the expense of another human being. That is tantamount to cannibalism as they reason it: not kosher, unacceptable in any reasonable, moral system of thinking, a stark breaking of the Law. Even as the act of eating and drinking Christ's Body and Blood gets "hidden" in, with and under the act of eating and drinking the bread and wine of the Eucharist (the meaning of vv. 41-59), the unreasonableness still stands, as testified by the debates about the "real presence" that still rage today. The teaching-or, more precisely, the offer—is clear: our life comes at the expense of Christ's life. That is too difficult, too incriminating, to take.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Does this offend you? (v. 61)*

Of course, the disciples at Capernaum are not simply questioning the reasonableness of Jesus teaching. Theirs is not a personally disconnected academic debated, no matter how much they may pretend it to be. In actuality, they are "offended" by Jesus' audacity, as Jesus himself exposes (v. 61). They are rejecting

him for who he is: the true bread from heaven whose death he claims will be grounds for establishing “eternal life” for them. Jesus’ words and teaching are not a metaphysical proposition to be debated, but a divine offer to be trusted—an offer of his very self, concretely presented in his words spoken and in the sacramental bread distributed. But to trust this offer is the one thing they cannot do “by their own reason or strength” (v. 64; see Luther, *The Small Catechism*, Third Article of the Creed, Explanation). It, too, is too difficult, too far beyond the grasp of their reason turned in on itself.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Christ forsaking (cf. v. 66) because God forsaken (cf. v. 65).*

The text ends with many of the disciples at Capernaum “turn[ing] back and no longer [going] about with Jesus” (v. 66). The offense is acted upon and their reason is followed. Yet, that is not the whole story, at least as Jesus interprets these disciples who do not believe in him and who betray him (v. 64). They are not as in charge of their actions as they think. Responsible they are; in charge, they are not. They disbelieve because they were already God-condemned (See John 3:17) or God-forsaken. Even Moses accuses them of this (5:45-46). But they don’t have the reasonableness, the wherewithal to see it. That is how Jesus describes their state before God, when he says that the disbelievers disbelieve because the Father is not “granting” it to them (v. 65). God is leaving them to themselves. For no one can come to Christ, the source of eternal life, unless the Father draws him. Left to their own devices, they are as good as dead already. That is what the best of their reasoning and their disbelieving gets them: death. The same is true for us.

PROGNOSIS: Trusting in Christ’s Offer Unto Life.

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *The Son of Man Ascending to where he was before (v 62)*

The good news is that Jesus is not merely a disinterested teacher or an expert debater about what is. Far better, he comes as an active agent who is sent into the world by the Father to bring about for us God-forsaken people a new world, a new reality, a new relationship before God and others, called "eternal life." To be sure, seeing Jesus in action this way will be as mind-blowing and reason-defying as his teaching. But it is what he is able and willing to do for us on the Father's behalf (5:19-47). What he does is die our death (the fact of our God forsakenness) for us so that he can overrule it, conquer it with his divine life, an "ascended life," a divine life that rooted in the love that the Father and the Son have shared in eternity. This is the offer he is making: that we have a share in the divine life, the life of the eternal, eternal life. His death and resurrection is the gate (10:7-10) to eternal life, opened wide for anyone to enter in.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Drawn by the Father*

Of course, what hinders us from entering is our reason. Reason can't believe such an offer. It seems too unconnected from reality, which it is—at least, reality as we know it and have it apart from Christ "in this world." And yet, people enter it, people come to faith, including you and me. Why is that? Those of us who believe know. We know that it is "not by our own reason and strength that we believe in Jesus Christ or come to him" (Luther's Small Catechism). We know that we are "drawn into" this gate, this new reality, by the Holy Spirit—that holying, faith-creating Spirit that blows where it wills (3:8-9) and "calls through the gospel" (Luther's Small Catechism). Indeed, the Spirit is so intimately tied to the Father's own act of drawing us into the saving work of Christ that we confess concerning her that she "proceeds from the Father and the Son" (Nicene Creed) and that she is "giver of life." To believe is to

be “drawn into” the divine life by God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The audacity of faith is that it connects us to Christ, signaling the end of our God forsakenness and the beginning of our new life as the “children of God” (1:12).

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

While it is true that believing is not an act of reasoning, nevertheless, reasoning is an act or fruit of believing. That is, reason itself is born anew by 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 this world and directed there as reasonable—including, their reasons for believing in Christ (See also 1 Pet. 3:15). But even more, Christians do 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 civil 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 health care or about sexuality or about when law should be compromised (or loosed) and when it should not—all 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. That is the audacity of faith.