

“Open Invitation”

August 18, 2024

Scripture: Proverbs 9:1-6; John 6:51-56, 59-63, 66

This scene in John’s gospel seems like it would spell the end of Jesus’ ministry in some ways. He’s saying things that many of the people following him find bizarre. Some of them really think he’s gone off the deep end. “My flesh is true food and my blood is true drink.” How would you react to someone making that claim? One of the unique features of this gospel is it doesn’t include the Last Supper where Jesus institutes the sacrament. We don’t find those words, “This is my body broken for you; this is my blood shed for you” in this gospel. Instead, we have this discussion and these fantastic claims.

Historically we know the early church celebrated what Paul called the Lord’s supper when they gathered. It might have included the traditional words we use today, or some form of them. Over time the meaning of that meal developed until by the Middle Ages the western Church, the Roman Catholic Church, taught the doctrine of “transubstantiation,” the belief that the bread and wine in the sacrament literally becomes Christ’s body and blood. As a result handling those elements became a specialized function. Only those consecrated for that purpose, through the priesthood, were authorized for it. That meant, at least by the time of the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century, the people did not receive the elements except once a year. The priest ate and drank on their behalf.

To Protestant ears, and even to modern Catholic ears, that sounds strange. But if you are convinced of the actual, physical presence of Christ in those elements, then how could you trust the people to handle them properly? So, this was one of the arguments the Reformers had with the Catholic Church. Those of us who were raised in the Reformed tradition need to remember, when that movement began the Medieval Catholic Church was the only church of any significance in the western world. People like Martin Luther, who was himself a monk, and later John Calvin were raised in Catholicism. They were rebelling against their own tradition; they weren’t “outside agitators.”

For these reformers scripture had to speak for itself. They rejected the tradition and doctrines that had been, in their view, imposed on scripture, obscuring its actual meaning. There’s a long history of how they came to that understanding having to do with Scholasticism and the Humanist movement and exposure to the original languages in which the Bible was written, Hebrew and Greek, which was new technology in that era and opened up a whole world of learning. All of it caused them to think about the faith in a new way and redefine the meaning of communion.

Part of the reason that had to happen, I think, was the realization that in a changing world where people were being exposed to more and more cultures outside their own, more ideas about the power of human agency to improve their condition through commerce and trade, and a growing literacy among the population, new ways of understanding the faith had to be found. Otherwise, people would begin to walk away from it altogether just like those followers in John’s gospel who could not get their heads around what he was claiming. For the reformers,

when it came to communion, Jesus is present in the meal but the bread remains bread and the wine remains wine.

In fact, in their understanding, the understanding we share in our church, that meal is only properly celebrated within the context of the whole community where everyone present is welcome to partake. We treat the elements with reverence, not because of what they are, but for what they symbolize, what they point us to. Like scripture, we take it seriously but not literally. I share all that with you as a reminder that our beliefs and practices don't come from nowhere. They didn't just drop down from the heavens, anymore than the Bible emerged from nowhere. Like scripture, which went through a centuries-long process of copying and redaction and editing, our understanding of the sacraments is the result of centuries of reflection and change.

The people around Jesus were put off by his claims. That's a common device in John's gospel. Whenever Jesus is speaking metaphorically, his listeners take him literally. Their decision to walk away may be the gospel writer's way of speaking to his own community. In effect he's telling them, "Not everyone is ready for this." There may be some concern that the world isn't flocking to their message. And there may be some temptation among them to give up on it. We can hear that reflected in the next verses when Jesus turns to his closest disciples, the Twelve, and asks them if they want to leave him, too. Peter's response is, "Where will we go? You have the words of eternal life." So, even though they don't fully understand everything Jesus is telling them, they know his wisdom, his path leads to life.

Still, that wisdom is available to anyone willing to accept it. How it's applied, how we appropriate it and integrate it into our practices and beliefs takes time and discernment. And every generation has a responsibility to examine its context and determine how best to embody Jesus' teachings in the world. For instance, there was a time when it was believed that only those who understood intellectually what was happening in communion should be allowed to receive it. So, children were prohibited from receiving communion. In the church where I grew up, I didn't receive communion until I was confirmed; that was the standard practice among Presbyterians. Since those days, there's been a shift in our understanding. We've come to realize that what happens at communion isn't intellectual; it's spiritual. And when we look at what people like John Calvin said about what happens at communion we find he admitted he had no idea. He says Christ is present in ways we cannot fully understand. Preventing our children from receiving communion only cuts them off from a central practice of the community and who are we to stand in the way of the Holy Spirit and try to limit its reach.

Jesus once said new wine requires new wineskins. A new understanding requires new ways of practicing our faith. The outer trappings of our life together are altered to accommodate new realities and insights. This is how the Church has always evolved. In his teachings Jesus is constantly challenging his listeners to be open to those insights and aware of those realities. We look around us and see how our worldview has changed and we reflect on what that means for the actions we take, whether it's the types of music we use or the prayers we say or the voices we listen to in our community.

I think that's what the image of Wisdom standing at the door, issuing an open invitation to anyone who will listen is meant to convey. She stands ready to entertain all those who are

willing to put aside simplicity and immaturity and find a new way of seeing and being and doing in the world. There's no assumption of some singular, absolute truth or belief to be followed. There is only an openness to be changed, to be molded through our encounters with one another and the world. And that's really the beauty of living in the world in our time. We have access to so many ways of understanding the world, so many cultures that can teach us new insights and help us articulate our own beliefs more clearly. And there are challenges in doing that. It can be scary to have your worldview altered or even shattered. I'm sure many of the people listening to Jesus who walked away did so out of fear as much as confusion. When we hear something that contradicts what we've been taught it can feel as though we've committed a crime or been violated. It takes a level of maturity to look past a perceived threat and allow ourselves to be influenced by new ideas.

Some of those ideas will be useful to us and others will be worthless. We're called to measure all of them by the wisdom we're taught through Jesus' life and teaching. Like Wisdom at the door, Jesus offers an open invitation to engage the world through his body, walking his path and learning his way. We don't to protect ourselves from the world or defend ourselves against the world. Our job is to live in the way of Christ, with compassion and justice and love. By doing that we will carry the body and blood of Christ into the world. We will become the presence of Christ so hope can endure, lives can be changed and wisdom will prevail.

Amen