

“Scandalous Good News?”

A Sermon by the Rev. Scott Herr

First Presbyterian Church, New Canaan, CT – August 22, 2021

Please Read:

I Kings 8:22-30, 41-43

John 6:56-69

We were supposed to fly to Paris tomorrow, but because of the Delta Variant numbers and CDC recommendation to avoid France, Kim and I decided it best to change our plans. We are sad because we were supposed to be celebrating a wedding with friends in Romania and stopping over on our way to be with friends in Paris. Of course, not going to Paris means missing out on some incredible table fellowship. Jean Anouilh once quipped, “Everything ends this way in France - everything. Weddings, christenings, duels, burials, swindlings, diplomatic affairs - everything is a pretext for a good dinner.”¹ I’m sure the Spadaccini family will have a good lunch today after celebrating Georgina’s baptism.

Good food helps with whatever you’re going through, and with all of the transitions going on in our congregation, I’ve been doing a little extra comfort food snacking on the side. I’m sorry to miss this Wednesday’s *Taste of New Canaan Stroll* ... Some of you can let me know what we will miss.

Our gospel text is the conclusion, *finally*, of Jesus’ long discourse on the “Bread from Heaven.” He speaks in graphic terms about the meal he offers to the hungry soul: “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me ...” It’s one of the more perplexing foodie chapters in John.

It’s no surprise the disciples complain, “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?” As we noted last week, the early Romans were afraid of the Christians because they heard this kind of language and accused members of the new sect called *The Way* of being cannibals, literally eating flesh and drinking blood!²

But while there was plenty of criticism of the followers of Jesus from outside the church, the ones complaining in today’s text are Jesus’ disciples! Why is it Jesus asks his followers, “Does this *offend* you?” The word here in the Greek is recognizable to us all, *σκανδαλιζει*. The question could just as easily be translated, “Does this scandalize you?”

I think Jesus meant to be very blunt with his language because he wanted us to remember something very important. But we first need to get around literal interpretations of this passage. Christians have never been cannibals. When we celebrate communion, we eat bread and drink wine; symbols of Christ’s body broken and blood poured out. But they are *signs* which point to a deeper mystery.

¹ Reuters, “Restaurants in France Prepare For Gastronomic Meal Deals,” (*International Herald Tribune*, August 22, 2012), 18.

² J. David Cassel, “Defending the Cannibals” (ChristianityTodayLibrary.com article posted January 1, 1998: <http://www.ctlibrary.com/ch/1998/issue57/57h012.html>) referenced August 23, 2012, writes: In his *Lives of the Caesars*, Suetonius (a Roman writer and secretary to Emperor Hadrian) was one of the first pagan writers to mention Christianity. But the context was hardly positive: believers are mentioned only as “a class of men given to a new and mischievous superstition.” This charge was repeated by Tacitus, the Roman historian, in his account of the burning of Rome. He acknowledged that Nero fabricated the accusations that Christians started the fire, but he held little sympathy for the “notoriously depraved” believers.

In speaking in such graphic terms Jesus is both foreshadowing to his first disciples and reminding those of us throughout history that he gave himself as a sacrifice on the cross. His body was literally broken, and his blood literally poured out. But it is the fruit of Jesus' sacrifice that we are meant to internalize, to "eat and drink."

Julie Canlis in her book, *Calvin's Ladder*, writes about the importance of the Greek word $\kappa\omicron\iota\nu\omicron\nu\iota\alpha$, which she argues has been translated "into almost meaningless words such as 'fellowship' or 'participation,' or even the ambiguous 'communion.'" What this word really means, she says, is more like *sharing-in-being*.³ She prefers George Hunsinger's definition of $\kappa\omicron\iota\nu\omicron\nu\iota\alpha$, as meaning "we are not related to God or to one another like ball bearings in a bucket, through a system of external relations. We are, rather, something like relational fields that interpenetrate, form, and participate in each other in countless real though often elusive ways ..."⁴

Jesus desires that we take in, that we participate more *in his life, his Spirit, his being of self-giving love*. In doing so, we become more open and relational with one another. I think though Jesus never uses the word *grace*, he is talking about grace here. We are forgiven, made, right with God, free to live a life that honors and glorifies the God of grace and love because of what Christ has done for us that which we could not do for ourselves! As Paul writes elsewhere, "he who knew no sin became sin so that *in him* we might become the righteousness of God."⁵

Why is this good news so scandalous? Part of the offense of the gospel as I have learned it is that I cannot generate my own salvation. I cannot save myself. It must be given to me. It must come from outside of me. I am fatally flawed. In other words, I can't give you advice today about how you can make your life better, but I can point you to the one who can *transform you from the inside out*.

One of my favorite authors is G. K. (Gilbert Keith) Chesterton. He wrote nearly a hundred books. He also wrote several hundred poems, two hundred short stories, four thousand essays, and several plays. So it was quite humorous when, at the invitation of *The Times* newspaper in London to join other authors in submitting essays answering the question, "What's Wrong With the World?" Chesterton replied with his characteristic wit and razor-sharp insight. To the question "What's Wrong with the World?" he replied smartly: "Dear Sirs, I am. Sincerely yours, G. K. Chesterton."⁶ It's a hard truth to admit that *we* are what's wrong with the world, that we are broken, that we are sinners, and that we can't deal with our sin alone.

The gospel is also offensive because the church is the less than perfect vehicle God chose to deliver the good news to the world. It's offensive because in case you haven't noticed, we in the church are messed up. If you are church shopping and looking for the perfect church, just keep moving, because here, we're broken sinners – sinners who are being saved, but sinners nonetheless. That's why old T. Guthrie Speers insisted on the brick masons leaving the clinkers in the wall there, to remind us that we are all clinkers, in a sense. We gather around the cross and point to our Savior. Lest we become too proud, we have only to read the news.

³ Julie Canlis, *Calvin's Ladder: Spiritual Theology of Ascent and Ascension* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2010), 6-7.

⁴ *Ibid*, 8.

⁵ II Corinthians 5:21.

⁶ G.K. Chesterton, *The Oracle of the Dog* (McClean, Virginia: The Trinity Forum Reading, 2008), 7.

Tuesday will mark our one-year anniversary when we arrived last summer, and so while we are still “newcomers,” we are learning about our little town. I’m involved with Rotary and the Exchange Club, for starters, and Kim is working with Staying Put and meeting amazing people who have been a part of this town for years. So we are following a number of issues unfolding and learning something about our community. The town council elections are coming up, affordable housing is an important topic of conversation, and the other two words, dare I mention them, are highly controversial: “The Library.” Now, I’m not here to discuss the pros and cons of some of the hotter political topics of our day, but I am concerned about how we are called to address those issues, and how we are called to treat those who have a different opinion or viewpoint than we do...

As Christians we don’t assume any higher moral ground ... If anything, we should show more humility. We need to remember the basis of our *koinonia*, our fellowship, and with whom, with what we are participating at our deepest levels of being. I would suggest to you that anytime we align ourselves with a group that excludes, dehumanizes, or degrades other human beings in the name of God, we are betraying the gospel. How did Jesus put it? “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment ...”

You see, the amazing thing about the gospel is that it opens the door for everyone to come in! It’s all about unmerited favor. Jesus puts it this way: “No one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father.” And yes, this still is scandalous.

I like Solomon’s prayer and commend it for your study. The greatest King of Israel begins with surrender ... with hands spread out to heaven. He praises God for being faithful and loving, then begs forgiveness.” What strikes me, although clearly Solomon believes that God has called the chosen people Israel for special service, is that Solomon also includes a prayer for the “foreigner”, that God would bless them as well. Even Solomon in his prayer understood that the temple, the place of meeting God, if God was to be honored there, was for all people, even the outsiders.

We are going to head off for vacation tomorrow, but in a short couple of weeks, we will be back for the Country Concert and Rally Day weekend, hopefully welcoming some new folks to come and see what’s going on in our church. And we will continue to work behind the scenes for a smooth transition in some of the key positions of leadership. We will say thank you to our friends and bless them on their way. And if we have any guests, I hope they will experience a community of radical welcome and acceptance, a community of understanding that hey, it’s complicated, and we can love you whatever your political opinions or persuasions may be. We’re on this journey together, and we’ll have more fun going together ...

Strangely, this gospel of grace is scandalous. But if we are to be God’s people, if we are to be the Body of Christ, the Holy One of God, if we are to be a gospel, Christ-centered community, then all must be welcome here. Jesus was lifted up so that he could draw *all people* to himself. There’s really nowhere else for us to go, if we want new life, eternal life!

There’s one more thing. We are not just to gather here and be Christ’s body broken and poured out for one another. Ernest Hemingway famously wrote about a “moveable feast.” I rather think of *the church* as the moveable feast of Jesus that is supposed to move out and share this new life,

this kingdom culture of unmerited favor and self-giving love. We are to be the bread and wine of God's blessing in New Canaan. We are to be the hands and feet of Jesus for Fairfield County and as far and wide as we can extend our reach. That means a good helping of faith and repentance is on the menu for us... Then we can go to those places in our own lives, and in the lives of our neighbors, where the gospel has yet to lift some burdens and lighten some dark spots. Then we can turn the other cheek, forgive more times than you'd like, speak the truth even when it is inconvenient, give more sacrificially to the poor, and show the patience love requires toward those who are really different from you ...

Yes, I hope that you will participate in the Taste of New Canaan Stroll this Wednesday and enjoy some good meals in these last weeks of summer. But more importantly, I hope that you will participate in the feast of Christ's grace and love. As scandalous as it may sound, we are called to eat Jesus every day, to believe the gospel, and so be transformed that our thoughts, words, and actions will be Christ for the world. As scandalous as it may be, we are to "eat" Jesus, to "abide" in him so that we may share in the wonderful blessing of his love and become the blessing of his love for the world.

In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.