

DINNER TIME

1st in a Series on Difficult Sayings of Jesus called, “What Did He Say?”
John 6:53-54 - Topic: Having a Full Life

A few years ago Laurie and I got a sound system for our TV. It has a sound bar that sits at the bottom of the TV, but then it has wireless rear speakers for the other side of the room, including a subwoofer. It's really cool that you can hear sound all around you when the system is on. However, we noticed a strange effect on one show we sometimes watch. This particular show is an action show and apparently to amp up the sense of action, it has especially loud background music and sound effects. We didn't notice this at first, but we found ourselves every time we watch the show periodically having what feels like an old person conversation. One of us will turn to the other and say, “What did he say?” And the other will say, “I don't know. I didn't catch it either.” At first I thought, “Wow we're getting so old.” It was like that classic conversation where the elderly wife says to the husband, “Are you thirsty?” And he answers, “It's not Thursday.”

I imagine there is some old person effect involved, but it turns out that's not the main problem. On a hunch we turned off the rear speakers when we watched that show, and after that we could hear the dialog just fine. The background music and sound effects were drowning out what they actors were saying. I know you are not particularly interested in our hearing issues or our sound system. But I tell you this because I am going to start a series of sermons today that made me think of that problem. I call this series, “What Did He Say?” The “He” in this series is Jesus (of course, this is church, right?). The issue here is not that we can't hear what he said at times, it's that we can't quite understand it. Last week I talked about having undying love for Jesus Christ. When I read through the gospels I always find myself loving Jesus. I see his character, his wisdom, his love, his goodness, his power, his ability to communicate, his courage and his sense of humor and I love that. But there are some pot holes in the road. There are these passages of Scripture where Jesus says things that just stop us in our tracks. They are weird, hard to understand and they make us very uncomfortable. We read them and think, “Uh, what now?” We have that, “What did he say?” moment because we just don't understand what he meant. And why in the world did he say that? It's not uncommon for us after some wrestling with the passage to sort of shrug our shoulders and move on, just ignoring the weird section, feeling kind of uneasy about his words, and totally stumped about why he would say such a thing. We wish he would have said something a bit more palatable and easier to comprehend.

So this morning I begin a series in which we will look at some of the strange things Jesus said. He didn't make a mistake when he said these things. They were all part of his communication ability. He had important points to make, and he made them in attention getting ways that can be, at times, puzzling. So we are going to make a valiant effort to sort out his meaning in these sometimes bizarre comments. Today we look at some of Jesus' most potentially offensive words in John 6:53-54.

EXPOSITION

JESUS WAS NOT FOR CANNIBALISM

Sometimes I think I don't even like to read these verses because they feel so creepy. "Jesus said to them, 'Very truly I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day.'" Um, what now? What kind of sick religion is this? Jesus is telling us to eat his flesh and drink his blood? Yuck!

He was a man before his time. Somehow vampires drinking blood have become a thing in our society, so maybe he would have fit right in today. But this sounds like Jesus is saying the key to life is cannibalism. When I read this old cannibal jokes start popping into my mind. Do you know why the cannibal became a hermit? He was fed up with people. Did you hear about the cannibal who became a police officer? He wanted to grill the subjects. Did you hear about the new cannibal restaurant that opened? They say dinner there costs an arm and a leg. Okay, enough of that.

It should not be hard for us to discern that Jesus was not speaking literally. In John 10:7 he said, "Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep." Does anyone think he was speaking literally, that he meant he was on a ranch, made of wood, had hinges and a latch? We understand that he was using a figure of speech, a metaphor to illustrate a truth. It would be absurd to interpret those words any other way. The same is true in John 6. Jesus was speaking figuratively. He was using a metaphor to help us understand some truth. To take this literally would be idiotic.

There are people who think that in this passage Jesus was speaking of the Lord's Supper, communion. So if you partake of communion you are doing what Jesus taught here. In Matthew 26:26-28 Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper this way, "While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, 'Take and eat; this is my body.' Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, saying, 'Drink from it all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.'" It sounds the same, right? Take and eat this, it's my body. Drink from this, it is my blood. So some would conclude that we obey Jesus' teaching in John 6 by partaking of communion.

Yes, the two events sound very similar. But it doesn't require much thinking to determine that taking communion could not have been what Jesus referred to. He made this speech well before he told his followers to remember him by eating the bread and drinking the wine of communion. Thus there is no way anyone could have understood that's what he meant here. If

he had said, “If you have any questions send me a text from your cell phone,” those words would have meant nothing to his audience. Cell phones and texts didn’t exist, so there’s no way anyone could have understood that. Similarly, communion didn’t exist at that point, so there’s no way anyone could have understood a reference to it.

The verbal similarity came about because when Jesus instituted the Lord’s Supper he used it to remind his followers of the truth that he taught them in this speech. This speech did not refer to the Lord’s Supper, which didn’t exist yet, but the Lord’s Supper symbolizes some truth that Jesus taught in this speech. We make a mistake if we think by partaking of the Lord’s Supper we are obeying what he said here. The Lord’s Supper merely reminds us of the principles Jesus taught here.

JESUS WAS FOR LIFE

What was he saying? Notice in verse 53 he said if we don’t eat of his flesh and drink his blood then there is no life in us, but if we do then we have eternal life. What does that suggest that the point of these words was? It was about having life. This becomes glaringly obvious when you consider the surrounding context. In verse 51 Jesus said, “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.” In verse 57 he said, “Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me.” At the end of verse 58 he said, “whoever feeds on this bread will live forever.” In verse 63 he said, “The Spirit gives life: the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you, they are full of the Spirit and life.”

Did you notice any ideas repeated in those verses? They are all about life and where it comes from. Especially Jesus talked about eternal life. So the question Jesus was addressing in this entire section was how does one gain life, especially eternal life? There are people who will say, “Oh, you Christians only want to talk about what happens after we die. You’re all about heaven. But I don’t even know if there really is life after death, if heaven even exists. What I know is real is life right now. That’s what I care about. If Jesus talked about how I can have real life right now, then I’d be interested.”

The person who raises that objection fails to understand what Jesus was saying. We should pay attention to the fact that Jesus said in verse 53 if you don’t do what he says, “you have no life in you.” Then in verse 54 he says if you do obey his instruction you have eternal life. He seems to be talking about *both* having life right this minute and having eternal life, life after death.

We tend to think of life right now and life after death as two separate categories. That’s understandable because they are separated by a definitive and dramatic event, meaning death, and because they appear to be qualitatively different. When we are alive right now you can see

a body moving and acting. But after we die that body no longer functions. It just decays and disappears. So whatever that life is it certainly seems to be different than what we have right now.

There is also the mystifying statement in verse 53 that if you don't do as Jesus says, "you have no life in you." Well that seems to be just plain untrue. If we had no life in us we'd be dead, and the fact is that we are continuing our metabolic processes just fine. We are very much alive, even if we don't buy what Jesus says.

That tells us that when Jesus spoke of having life he was talking about more than existence. He claimed that it is possible to exist without actually having life. Clearly then when he referred to life he was speaking of some quality or characteristic that can be lacking in us even though we exist. The fact that he connects eternal life with this tells us that somehow life after death and that quality he calls life right now are more closely related than we might think. There is something that apparently connects the two.

Some might think that at issue is merely duration. Perhaps you exist right now but you don't possess eternal life. Yet there are a couple of facts that show that this cannot be what Jesus referred to. The first fact is that every human is going to exist eternally. Some will live in God's kingdom eternally, and some will live separated from God's kingdom. So the issue is not duration, but quality of life. The second fact is later, in John 10:10, Jesus said that he came that we might have life to the fullest. Again he was talking about quality of life. So at issue in this whole discussion is not just existing, but the quality of the life we live right now and eternally.

We've already seen what the key difference is. Will we live in God's kingdom or outside it? The kind of life we live will be dramatically different depending on whether we are in God's kingdom or not. What is life like in God's kingdom? Consider what that would be like. You would be in a place where there was no evil and no death. It is a place where you are in God's presence, totally accepted and bathed every moment in his unconditional, unlimited love. You would feel valued more than you have ever known and have always longed for. You would be safe. You would be happy to a degree you've never dreamed was possible. You would not fear other people or events because evil has been eradicated.

Life, then, as Jesus described it, this fullest possible life, is living as one would in God's kingdom. It has unshakeable peace. It is living with boundless joy. It is living without fear. It is a life with hope, with meaning. It is life connected to and loved by God. It is life as full and joyful as it can be. That is what life will be like in God's eternal kingdom, and Jesus said that

while we may not experience that in its fullest form right now, we can actually begin living with a taste of it.

About a month ago I went through a bout with a sinus infection. Mercifully I was able to get in to see my doctor who treated it and we knocked that thing out fairly quickly. But it reminded me of a time when I had a sinus infection and thought I was dealing with chronic allergy issues that plagued me almost nonstop at the time. I felt miserable and was resigned to the idea that this was just my lot in life. But I found a doctor who was able to figure out what my particular problem was and attacked it with a treatment that included antibiotics to defeat the infection, among other things. About a day and a half later I noticed I was feeling better. I wasn't totally over it yet, but I was better and I had hope. Man did that make a difference! That's sort of like the connection between eternal life in God's kingdom and our life right now. God's kingdom is the treatment for the disease that infects life right now. Right now as we do what Jesus said we start getting better. We are not completely over it, but we are improved, we begin to experience what healthy life ought to feel like, and we have hope that some day we will be completely healed and healthy, experiencing true, full, eternal life in God's eternal kingdom.

How do we get that kind of life? That's the question Jesus was addressing in this unusual speech. And that's a question everyone wants an answer for. If you asked people, "Are you experiencing life to the fullest, life as you wish it were and it ought to be," how do you think they would respond? I feel pretty confident that if they were honest they would say no. Everyone feels like things are not quite as they should be, fears they are missing out on something and that in some way life ought to be better.

If you ask people to think of moments in which they were fully, totally alive, they usually can only think of a very few, very brief moments in their lives when that was true. Some would say they have never felt fully alive. At best most of us have only a very few fleeting moments of feeling truly and totally live. And inside everyone knows there ought to be more to life than they experience. They likely would not be able to identify exactly what that is, but they know that something is missing, something's not right, and they wish they could fix it and get that something. People spend their lives searching around to try to get that. That is what Jesus was talking about in these verses. How do you get eternal life, life as we wish it were and want it to be, and begin experiencing a taste of it right now?

There are myriads of proposed answers to that question. The flavor of the month in our society is to say that everyone has to find their own answer, that it is different for everybody. There are a couple of problems with that. Perhaps the biggest of them is, nobody's finding it! The "each person must find his own" solution ends up with nobody getting what we're all looking for.

The other potential problem with that approach is that it assumes there is no one truth, an assumption that makes it impossible to have any meaningful discussion of anything. It negates itself. It also is contrary to the way most everything works in the real world. I have the great joy this week of undergoing a colonoscopy. It's a routine screening, although that is a singularly inappropriate description of that test, because there is nothing remotely routine about it. "You're going to stick what, up where?" That is not routine in any sense of the word! At least I don't do anything like it in my routine. Of course, the test itself isn't the problem because they anesthetize you so you don't know anything about the horror and indignity of it. It's the preparation. Have you noticed, if you have had the privilege of going through this, they don't tell you, "Each person must find his or her own way to prepare"? I wish they would say that, because I for sure would not choose the way they require. When I had to first go to the doctor's office, how would it be if I asked Google Maps how to get there it had responded, "Each person must find his or her own way"? Not helpful!

Jesus' answer to the question is mystifying. Eat his flesh and drink his blood. Well, that's appalling. It is bizarre and leaves us at a loss as to what he meant by that. We've ruled out the literal interpretation of it. We know it was a metaphor, but a metaphor for what? What did it mean?

Fortunately it's not that hard to figure out. Both the imagery itself and the larger context of these verses give us clues. What is the point of eating and drinking? We eat because our lives depend on food. Without food we starve and die. Similarly we drink because we need fluids to live. So eating and drinking are essential for life. They are what is necessary to give us life. The metaphor here is that Jesus is essential for this true life, this eternal life. We have to depend upon him as completely for this full, spiritual life, as we depend upon food and water to sustain us physically. But how do we depend upon him?

Remember in verse 54 Jesus said if one eats his flesh and drinks his blood that person "has eternal life and I will raise him up at the last day." Now compare that with verse 40. "For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day." Time for a little math. There is a property in math called the transitive property. Technically the property is if A is related to B by a rule, and B is related to C by the same rule, then A is related to C by that rule. If A is equal to B, and B is equal to C, then A is equal to C. That's just simple logic. Let's apply that to these verses. Notice that Jesus says eating his flesh and drinking his blood is equal to having eternal life and being raised up on the last day. That's what verse 54 tells us. But verse 40 tells us that looking to Jesus and believing in him equals having eternal life and being raised up on the last day. That means that believing in him equals eating his flesh and drinking his blood.

Oh, good. That feels a lot better. That's something I can understand. So Jesus says believing in him to the same degree that you believe in and trust food and drinking water to sustain you physically, is what will produce the life we long for, that eternal life in God's kingdom. It will begin producing it right now, and will continue in eternity.

But isn't it true that there are people who are followers of Christ, who believe in him as he said, who don't experience the life that he referred to here, who feel like they are missing something? Yes, it is. Doesn't that negate Jesus' claim here and make it like the claims of other theories? The answer to that will be revealed by considering the next point.

JESUS EMPLOYED SHOCK THERAPY

One question that this passage always prompts for me is, why did Jesus talk this way? Why didn't he just say people needed to believe in him and depend on him for life? Why use a metaphor that was offensive? Even though people should have understood he was speaking figuratively, the expressions he used themselves offended people to the point that they would no longer listen to him. Verse 66 says, "From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him." Many were turned off by his offensive words! Why did he do it?

There is something I think of as spiritual gravity affecting us. We all know that we experience the effects of physical gravity every moment of our lives. Our world is orbiting the sun at 67,000 miles per hour. At our location we are spinning at over 900 miles per hour. Why don't we go flying off into space? Gravity keeps us solidly pinned to the earth. That force is working on you every moment of your life. It never lets up.

There is another force working on you every moment of your life even though you are not conscious of it, just as you are not conscious of physical gravity. It is spiritual gravity. It is a force that pulls us toward the belief that life is found through something other than Jesus, especially something of this age on this planet. We find life through the right combination of circumstances, or through status, power, pleasure, the list is endless. Every moment of your life you are being pulled in that direction by this force.

You can actually see this in John 6. We think life is hard, and it is, but it was much harder for people in Jesus' day. In his commentary on this gospel John Quimby wrote of Jesus' contemporaries, "Getting bread was a critical problem. People were always hungry. Most had but one cooked meal a day. To eat and be filled was a rare experience." People were always hungry. They had a daily struggle just to get food to survive. At some level you know that the average person felt if they could just have enough to eat without stress, without struggling to get it, well then life would be all they could hope for. They'd have full life.

In the opening verses of this chapter Jesus did a miracle. There was a crowd of probably more than 10,000 people following him. That day he took 5 pieces of pita bread, and 2 sardines and used that miniscule amount of food to feed the entire crowd! Verse 12 tells us they all had enough to eat. This was that rare day when they ate until they were filled. And they didn't have to do a single thing to get the food. Jesus just handed it out for free. An awful lot of them decided right there that following Jesus was the best thing that had ever happened to them. Just follow him and you'll get free food, as much as you can eat. This was heaven. In verse 26 Jesus said to them, "Very truly I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw the signs I performed but because you ate the loaves and had your fill."

They were buying the 'Jesus for Messiah' ticket completely, because they envisioned a life where they wouldn't have to struggle, wouldn't have to work, Jesus would just give them food so they could eat until they were full, every single day. In their minds, that was the best life has to offer. Our version of that is likely quite different, because we have lots of food to eat. But we have a version. Spiritual gravity constantly pulls us to believe that the fullness of life that we long for can be had if we have enough money, if we have enough success, if we have the right spouse, or if our spouse finally changes and becomes what we wish they were, or if we were famous. The list is endless. Our kids now have little children. There have been moments when I suspect they've believed that fullness of life would come if they could just have a solid night's sleep.

The tug of that idea is so powerful and so persistent that we get pulled into it without being aware of it. Our son has the frequent experience of having patients come into the ER and suffer cardiac arrest. They do something that is rather surprising. Toby and the other doctors have a machine that delivers a powerful electric shock to their bodies. That jolt of electricity can shock their heart so it starts beating in rhythm again. It saves their lives.

Jesus used this offensive language in this speech because he had just seen how enormously impacted by spiritual gravity people were, and how they were not even aware of it. He had to do something to shock them, to bring them back to spiritual consciousness. That's what he was doing here. He was shocking people to try to help them to see the truth.

That brings us back to the question of why believers at times are not experiencing the life that Jesus spoke of here. It is because of the effect of spiritual gravity. They are believing that life comes from something other than Jesus, and are pursuing that. Even worse, they usually are not even aware of what they are doing. As we pursue life in other things all we do is condemn ourselves to fail to experience true, full life, the life that only Jesus can give us.

APPLICATION

FEAST ON JESUS

If we are to experience life it will only come from believing in Jesus. If you have not begun this journey of life that will never end, you can start today by putting your faith in Jesus. He invites you to believe in him, trust in what he has done for you, and look to him to give you life. You will find this life nowhere else. But if you believe in him you will begin experiencing it and you will know that you will live eternally in his kingdom, experiencing life.

KEEP BELIEVING IN JESUS

It is very common for Christians to think “Okay, I put my faith in Jesus. I believe I am forgiven and have eternal life. That’s the first step. Now what do I need to do so I can begin experiencing the full life Jesus promised? What are the next steps?”

You probably noticed that Jesus had a very simple formula for how to have eternal life and to even begin experiencing its effects in your days right now. It is to believe in him. Let me draw your attention to the fact that he did not have further steps in how to do this. It is not: Step One, believe in Jesus. Step Two, pursue the spiritual disciplines of reading your Bible and praying each day. Step Three...This is a One Size Fits All, one step plan for how to experience life. It is to believe in him, and to keep on believing in him.

Yes, we start our new life in Christ by believing in Jesus. But we continue in it, we grow in it, we experience more and more of it by continuing to believe in Jesus and depending on him as the source of true, eternal, full life.

TAKE YOUR PULSE

Unfortunately spiritual gravity never lets up. As you listen to me it is pulling on you. When you sleep tonight it will be pulling on you. When you wake up tomorrow it will be pulling on you even though you are usually not even slightly aware of it. The problem for us is that we get pulled into believing that life is found in something other than Jesus.

Remember, we experience fullness of life only to the degree that we feed on Jesus, to the degree that we believe in him and look to him for that life. When we get pulled into looking for that life from something else it erodes the fullness of the life Christ gives us.

Recently one Sunday Laurie and I came to church and went through our usual routine of setting up, working on music, getting ready to preach, going through the service, visiting with people, then closing up. That Sunday was one of those days where everybody seemed to have somewhere else to be. Obviously we are a small church, and when a significant number don’t show up, things look pretty vacant. There wasn’t much difference in how things look when we

rehearsed for the service at 9 AM and when we actually had the service at 10. I suppose if I really liked leading a service for empty chairs it would have been fine, but Laurie and I went home feeling pretty discouraged. I normally am not much affected by how many people come or don't come to services, but this one got to me. That afternoon I tried to sort of lose the discouragement by watching a football game, but there was just a sense of heaviness and weariness that persisted. I finally had to think through what was going on. I realized that somewhere in there I was looking for life through some sense of success in ministry, through feeling like our ministry is going to continue. In so doing what I accomplished was lessening the joy of the life Christ has given us, and eroding the peace he give.

When we find ourselves feeling discouraged, disappointed, angry, bitter, resentful, frustrated, cynical, annoyed, hopeless, down, somewhere inside of us we are looking for something other than Jesus as the source of life. We need to take our pulse and identify what it is we are looking for, then we need to let go of that and get back to believing in Jesus for life.

REJOICE IN THE LIFE JESUS GIVES

We need to remember what a priceless gift we have in this new, full life in Jesus. Comedian Louis CK appeared on the *Late Night With Conan O'Brien* television show and during that appearance made some revealing comments. He said, "Underneath everything in your life there is that thing, that empty, forever empty. That knowledge that it's all for nothing and that you're alone. It's down there and sometimes when things clear away, you're not watching anything and you start going, 'Oh, no, here it comes. That I'm alone.' It starts to visit you. Just this sadness. Life is tremendously sad just by being in it."

He's right. Life is sad. It is tragic. And we do feel that sadness. We try to run from it. We feel that emptiness and loneliness. That is not the full life Jesus came to bring us. In Christ we have an answer for that. Yes, life is hard, but it is not hopeless because Jesus gives us eternal hope. Our lives are not meaningless and empty, but bursting with purpose and meaning. We are not alone, for Jesus will never leave us or forsake us. We don't need to fear those quiet moments, for God has given us healing for the sadness.

It is easy to forget what Jesus has done for us. It is helpful if we remember, if we remind ourselves of the life we have in him. We have his presence with us. We have his unconditional love. We have the certainty of eternal life. We have a life of enormous meaning and significance. We have truth, direction, his guidance for life. We have the life we long for. Let's rejoice in it and thank him for it.