
Thank God For Difficult Teachings!

**A sermon by the Rev. Canon Cathy Zappa
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Did you have the feeling that you were in the movie *Groundhog Day* just now, as you were listening to today's Gospel? I did! This is our fifth week in a row in the *same* chapter in John, and the *same* bread-of-life discourse—a discourse in which Jesus' words seem to go round and round in circles. If you're confused, you're in good company!

You're in company with the crowd whom Jesus fed, miraculously, at the beginning of this chapter. They follow him, hoping for more of his wonder bread and power, but he tells them to "work for the bread that doesn't perish." They want to know exactly what to do for this bread, and he tells them to believe. They ask for a sign, like manna from heaven, and he tells them that his father gives the true bread from heaven. In exasperation, they demand, "Just give us this bread already!" And Jesus tells them that they have it already. "I am the bread of life," he says, "come down from heaven to do my father's will—which is to lose nothing of all that he has given me, but to raise it up on the last day."

At this point, some of the Jews there, learned and faithful folk, start to grumble. They're not just confused; they're miffed! "Who does this guy think he is? *God?*" Jesus responds with more circles—though he adds that, well, some will get it, and some won't. Even though, this bread is for the world—available to any and all who believe—not just those who have the right lineage or ideology. "And the bread that I will give for the life of the world," he says, "is my flesh."

Perhaps to simplify matters, they take him literally and object, again. Surely, Jesus is exasperated by now, too, but he doesn't give up on them. On the contrary, he digs in deeper and offers what sounds like an invitation: "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me," he says, "and I in them."

This isn't particularly clarifying, though, and Jesus' disciples start to grumble, too: "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it." Some of them—his *disciples*, not the crowds or the Jews-- some of his *disciples* turn back and leave because of it.

And no wonder! This teaching *is* difficult. That's where I land today, too. I've spent the last week, again, trying to wrangle it into a nice, neat, digestible, and inspirational nugget for you to chew on over the next week; but it just won't cooperate. It refuses to be reduced to a singular meaning and scoffs at my attempt to master it with my head alone.

That's my first confession as your preacher today. My second is this: when I hear this chapter, something in me cries out, "Alert! Alert!" There are red flags waving everywhere, though they have more to do with how it has been interpreted than what it actually says.

It has been interpreted dualistically--pitting the material against the spiritual, and debasing this world and flesh. *As if* the Gospel didn't begin with the Word becoming flesh and dwelling here, among us!

It has been interpreted as exclusionary and divisive—exalting insiders over outsiders, Christians who get it over the Jews and others who don't... and therefore are excluded from eternal life. Which is to miss completely the fact that the disciples also don't get it, and struggle to believe, and turn away! Which is to miss also that this bread of life is *for the whole world!*

It has been interpreted in ways that are absolutist, as if Jesus were giving a clear map to an exclusive club,

along with a clear guest list. And the ticket, the golden ticket to get in, is "*belief*"—narrowly understood as certainty—as unwavering intellectual assent to certain propositions about God, Jesus, and humanity.

With such approaches to scripture, difficult teachings like this can all too easily become a closed door: a door that closes out whatever or whoever is other, uncomfortable, unknown. A door that closes out parts of ourselves—the parts that still don't understand, that are offended, that stand in the gap between the good promises of God and the harsh realities we face every day. A door that closes out Jesus himself, the *living* Word.

All this is quite ironic, because at every turn, Jesus resists this narrowing, this closing down, of his meaning. Whenever anyone tries to shut down the conversation with a premature conclusion, he *opens* it up again, with open-ended, evocative, and paradoxical language and images—the only kind suited to mystery.

To be sure, Jesus' use of contrasts in *John* can seem judgmental and divisive, if that's what you're looking for: there are those who love darkness, and those who love light. Those who receive Jesus, and those who reject him. Flesh and spirit, death and life, bread that perishes and bread that endures. All these contrasts alert us: "There is a decision to be made here! There is something important at stake!"

But Jesus also plays with and moves around in these contrasts, so that every time you think you've figured out who's who—who belongs in which category—he goes and shakes it up: the insider becomes the outsider; the teacher, the student; the sinner, the believer; the disciple, the disbeliever, or denier, or betrayer. The judge, the judged. As a reader, I often find myself judging those who don't get it, only to find out that I'm one of them! Which may be the point.

This *is* a difficult teaching. And it offers Jesus' disciples a choice: they can give up and go away, which some of them do. Or they can stay, as Peter does. And let's not imagine that he stays because he suddenly has everything all figured out. He *stays* because he knows Jesus, or is coming to know him. He knows where he'll find what is true, and essential, and life-giving.

This *is* a difficult teaching. It may offend or challenge or confuse you, too. The question is, "*Do you also wish to go away?*"

We have many ways to run away, don't we? We can be dishonest about what we see or how we react, stuffing down our discomfort or offense. We can claim mastery over it, reducing its complexity to a once-and-for-all, not-to-be-revisited answer. We can reason away its authority or relevance for us: "Oh, Jesus didn't really say that!" or "That was then, this is now." We can give up completely, taking instead our own disbelief or confusion as the final answer.

Or, we can stay. We can stay, and keep looking, keep wrestling, keep wondering. We can stay, and humbly confess, "I don't know. But I'm here—with all my hunger, all my thirst, all my longing, all my confusion and fear and resistance, all my disbelief. Because I hope, I trust, in you."

These words, "*I don't know*," are an opening to learning and humility—a first step toward trust in, and encounter with, the living God. Indeed, as we see throughout the Gospel of John, it's often what people think they already know that prevents them from hearing, receiving, understanding Jesus and the bigger truth he teaches and embodies.

This certainly has been my experience: When I've reached the edge of my understanding, and kept searching... When I've thrown up my hands in despair over passages that trouble me, but stayed anyway, and wrestled, engaged, prayed, I've found Jesus drawing me, not toward a logical proof, but toward Jesus himself. Toward life. Toward a living faith.

This isn't just about how we approach scripture, of course. It's about how we approach faith and discipleship. Do we stay when it gets hard? Do we hang in there when we don't understand? When we come up against the limits of our own understanding or control, will we close down or open up? Will we see the invitation that is here? It is an invitation to be nourished by, to participate and abide in, Jesus himself, who offers us abundant and eternal life.

Thanks be to God for difficult teachings!