

No Offense

John 6:60-69

When our kids were little we were introduced to the storyteller Bill Harley. If you are a regular of the Storytelling circuit in Jonesborough you're probably familiar with him as well. His stories are for kids, people who used to be kids, and people who just like a good story. One of his good stories is called "The Battle of the Mad Scientists." It's about a play that he and a friend put on in their garage when they were kids that ends badly after the first act when their 5-year-old stagehand eats two whole bags of stale circus peanuts. But one of the most memorable parts of the story has nothing to do with the play itself. It is the boys' discovery that you can say just about anything you want to someone, you can be as rude and painfully honest as you want, and get away with it as long as you attach two simple words at the beginning: No offense. No offense, but....

"No offense" is, of course just another version of the Southern, "bless her heart." It's what you say when you are about to say something hurtful or unkind to or about someone:

Bless her heart, her singing voice just isn't what it used to be, is it?

No offense, but that new haircut kind of gives you that Bride of Frankenstein look.

Today is our last day in the 6th chapter of John, and the only ones left standing are the disciples. But there's even dissent among the ranks there. Not everyone is a happy camper anymore. But what is surprising is the way Jesus goes about asking them what the problem is. "Are you offended?" he asks them. Why should they be offended? It's not like he told them that having them around is about as pleasant as having chiggers, or that they are about as dumb as a box of rocks. He didn't say anything about their mamas or their girlfriends or their Alma mater's defense. So why should they be offended? It wasn't personal.

Or was it?

Last week we asked why "the Jews" were so bent out of shape. Why were they outraged by Jesus saying that he was the bread of life, and that they have to eat his flesh? After all, it's only a matter of logic: if Jesus is bread, it has to be eaten, right?

But he did say one other thing. He said that the bread that he *will give* for the life of the world is his flesh. He *gives* his flesh. And here, of course, he steps out of the world of pure metaphor and is talking about his crucifixion. His death wasn't an unhappy consequence of sticking his nose into the religious and political arenas. He *gave* his life. No one took it from him.

What gets the Jews so riled wasn't just the tastelessness of the conversation (if you will excuse the pun), or that it smacks of cannibalism. What really gets their goat is that everything he is saying about himself flies in the face of their image of God. He has said things about God that they cannot possibly believe.

He has said that God isn't just an up there, somewhere in the sky kind of God. He has said that God isn't just an almighty, dignified, persnickety sort who's not just glorious, but a bit of a diva. What he has said is that God is a flesh and blood kind of God who would stoop to getting around on two feet and give up knowing what tomorrow holds. The kind who would willingly go through puberty, and check out the cute girls in school, and get chicken pox and food poisoning, and stink to high heaven after a day out on the boat fishing, just like the rest of the guys. He's just said that God would break the rules of their religion by touching the bodies of the dead and the sick, and work on the Sabbath if not working on the Sabbath meant that someone would suffer. He's just said that the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God who created the world and gave the ten commandments, and about 500 others, would gladly pass an evening drinking a pint with the guys down at the pub or after the game. He's just said that God – not some heavenly messenger or prophet, or pastor, but God – is likely to show up at your kid's wedding or your mother's sickbed or at your next party. When Jesus is talking about bread and heaven and life and flesh and blood, what he's saying is that the exalted and almighty God, the God they had always thought was rather stern and taciturn and demanding, was rolling around in the mud of life with them. Not watching from afar, but plodding along beside, and even going places they would never dream of going.

That's what set off "the Jews." Jesus was telling them that God wasn't nearly as highfalutin' as they had thought; as they had needed God to be. God could look just like your next door neighbor, or the guy from your bowling team. And frankly, I've known some good church-going people who get heartburn over that same thing, the thought of God incarnate, God living in the flesh, a human being. For some it was an offense to their theological sensibilities, God condescending to be just a regular Joe; a God who is fully human, or a person who is fully divine. For others, it is just a matter of implausibility. They cannot believe anyone would expect them to believe that a man who is so clearly, so obviously and completely human could be God. They cannot believe that a man, a human being, could make water out of wine. The miraculous feeding of the 5,000 becomes a miracle of sharing – one person brings out his lunch to share, and before you know it everyone is pulling out their sandwiches and crackers and oranges, and there is enough food for everyone. They know that a man cannot come back from the dead, and so each spring they celebrate the metaphor of the empty tomb, how life is reborn out of emptiness and hopelessness. To imagine it otherwise is an offense to the intellect.

But what about the others? What about us? Those of us who believe that God became man, that people were healed and water became wine, and death was not the end. Are we off the hook, or is it possible that we, too, have taken offense? I have an idea that for most of us, there is sticking point, a point at which Jesus and his teachings do become personal. Like, maybe, the point when he talks about how he will give his flesh. He won't protect himself or his rights. He won't fight for his honor. He won't set himself up as king, even though the people were getting ready to crown him the minute he gave them all food. He won't demand their respect. He'll give up his life. Lay down his authority. And hint broadly that eternal life for us isn't found just in applauding his sacrifice, but in copying it.

I wonder, sometimes, if we've gotten so caught up in the triumph of the empty grave, and in the mainstreaming of Christianity by Constantine, that we have forgotten the very basics of what Jesus taught us about this life of discipleship. That it is about giving up your life. It is about giving your flesh, our flesh, for the life of the world. I wonder if we have gotten so enamored of being on the side of the triumphant Jesus and his Church that we have forgotten that what Jesus called his disciples to is a life of vulnerability. A life of risk. To be on the side of Jesus is to operate from a vantage point of weakness, not strength.

Maybe we haven't left Jesus and gone home like his opponents and some of his disciples did, but I do worry sometimes that we have watered down his message and his teachings to make his Church a more comfortable, palatable place to be for a wide variety of people and their beliefs and lifestyles. I worry that we Christians operate more from a position of strength these days than a position of weakness and vulnerability. We are not very good at giving up our time and our treasures, much less our flesh and blood for the world around us. They are ours, we tell ourselves; God gave them to us because God loves us and is pleased with us. The world can have what is left when we are done with it. Our time. Our treasures. Our attention. Our compassion. Our lives.

Last week I mentioned that our Sunday evening service is attempting to be more of an emerging church kind of service. And actually, 'emerging' or 'emergent' church is a new term that is already passé. But the idea hasn't died. 'Emergent,' or whatever you want to call it, isn't a style of worship, but a desire to be a more authentic church. These are communities that simply want to worship together, study, pray and share their lives together in more authentic ways, and give their lives to the communities they live in. They work for justice, they work to alleviate suffering, and they open their doors to people who have had more people tell them that God isn't happy with them than that God loves them.. You might say they are "back to basics" churches, churches without a lot of internal programming and administration. They aren't doing church, running the church; they are *being* the Church. They are giving their very lives, their flesh and blood, to each other and to the world.

In any of the four gospels there are always three audiences – Jesus' first listeners, the audience of the gospel writers, and us. In these verses Jesus is talking to Peter and James and John and the other twelve, but he is also talking to John's community, and he's talking to us. He's talking to individuals, and he's talking to the Church. And he's asking what kind of Church we will be. Will you be the kind of church that is put off by me and all that I stand for? Will you be a church that compromises? he asks. Or will you be a Church that embraces the idea that eternal life and self-sacrifice go hand in hand?

His disciples were right- it is a difficult teaching. Eternal life comes from bodies broken and blood shed. Jesus' and ours. No offense.