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All Saints Episcopal Church

*Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people, but as wise.
Lay aside immaturity, and live, and walk in the way of insight.*

Today's Gospel reading is one of the several passages in which the writers of John talk about Jesus as the bread of life: I am the living bread, this bread is my flesh, those who eat my flesh have eternal life, the one who eats this bread will live forever. There are many feeding stories in John and the other Gospels - the feeding of the 5000, meals Jesus shared with the well-to-do and meals shared with tax collectors, sex-workers and terrorists. But today's phrases are only in John.

John's Jesus uses incredibly provocative language in chapter 6. So provocative, in fact, that some people stopped following him because of it.

"Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink."

Wow! Imagine hearing this for the first time, with no other experience of John's words or any other words about Jesus. Imagine hearing this without any previous experience of the Eucharist. Imagine attending church for the first time in your life today as this passage is read!

Imagine hearing Jesus say these words. *Eat flesh? Drink blood?* I think I might be grossed out. That doesn't sound much like wise living.

We know that some of the people in the crowd - and even some of Jesus' disciples - took such offense at Jesus that they stopped following him because he said these things—but that's next week's Gospel lesson and Jim can tell you about that.

It is interesting that Jesus doesn't tone down or soft-pedal his language in the least bit. There's not even a hint that he might be speaking poetically or metaphorically. He doesn't just say it once, and then move on to other things.

Eat my flesh. Drink my blood. If you don't you'll die. If you do, you'll live forever.

He drives this point home clearly and frequently.

We hear it—as people who are “churched”—and I think we largely let the shocking words swirl around us without much reaction. I mean, of course Jesus is talking about the Eucharist...right? We hear these words against a lifetime of hearing: *take, eat, this is my body...take, drink, this is my blood of the new covenant.*

For us, the words have lost their offensiveness.

But, Jesus didn't launch these rhetorical bombshells so that they'd fizzle out with time.

No, I think that Jesus was stirring the pot on purpose. He wanted to say things that challenged people, even to the point that they might decide that they'd have to leave the group.

One thing is clear here: Jesus isn't about people-pleasing. He's not about glad-handing, and smoothing out the wrinkles so that everyone can go away happy, and come again happy. He's not about just saying and doing just about anything to draw large audiences.

Do you remember the news story of a few weeks ago, the one about the church pastor in Mississippi who refused to marry an African-American couple in the church, the church they had been attending by the way, because some of the white people in the congregation were upset about it? I was upset about the story, too, despairing the fact that it seems we still haven't learned that discrimination is wrong especially racial discrimination in the South. I understand that the pastor has publicly confessed his wrongs, and sought forgiveness—but I have to say that this story scared me.

Because it could have been me.

Now, I don't think that I would have made the exact same mistake, at least, not over race, *per se*. But what happened is that the pastor was trying to please everyone. He said that he wanted a “win-win” situation.

He dreamed of resolving the situation with the people in the church who didn't want the couple getting married in 'their' church by moving the wedding out of the church, but he would still marry the couple and they would get their storybook wedding, just at another location.

Apparently he was just trying to keep things quiet, and do things in such a way that everyone would go home happy.

That is, of course, until all the news networks and social media "news" posted the sad story of a church whose decisions seemed to be made with bigotry and racism in mind.

But, let me repeat: What made a knot in the pit of my stomach was that a story like this could have been about me. I can identify with the pastor who just wanted everything to be *fine*. Who just wanted to please everyone. Who wanted everyone to be happy and telling their friends to come to their cute, happy little church. I get it. But I don't deal well with conflict, and it scares me that I might make a decision based on what will keep the peace, not based on what is the right thing to do.

But following Jesus means sometimes you need to say the hard thing. Sometimes it's not possible to find a win-win solution where everyone goes home happy.

Sometimes people get mad, and they leave, and they never come back. And, all because you said something like, "No, this is God's Church, and all of God's Children are welcome here." Or, "No, their love is a gift of God, and it will be celebrated in God's Church."

Sometimes the truth is easy. And good. And, maybe even fun! Something everyone can stand and cheer about.

But, there are those moments when the truth is hard. And, to some, offensive. And, speaking the truth might just mean that some won't like you anymore, they'll stop coming on Sundays. They'll pull their pledge. They'll tell everyone they know about what happened.

When I was in seminary, some of my friends and I would joke about the idea that what we wanted to be was 'universally loved and adored.' We laughed about it, of course, but there was seriousness behind our joke. Don't we all want to please the

people with whom we live and move and have our being? Sure. But it's not possible to do that all the time, and it almost certainly impossible to do that in a church!

So the question becomes: If I am confronted with difficult situations like these, will I be strong enough to take a stand on the side of justice and truth? Or will I cop out and take the easy road to smooth things over? I'd like to think I will speak to truth no matter what, but I am never sure that I won't end up caving in.

What about you? This is a potential problem for all of us, not just priests and pastors. What happens at school or at work when those around you start talking about others in a way that you know is wrong, or discriminate against others in their actions? Do you stand up for what is right? Does your silence betray you?

This is the time when it is definitely appropriate to ask, What Would Jesus Do?

And the answer, of course, is that Jesus never took the easy way out, never accepted the majority opinion if it was not the just thing to do.

We talk all the time about the things Jesus calls us to do - feeding clothing, healing, visiting those who are in need. But we don't often mention that we are also called to be like Jesus when he stood up to the Pharisees, or broke the Sabbath laws, or defended people on the margins from being persecuted.

We are called to do those things as well. But I would venture to say that those are harder to do, especially in our present time, where 'proving' our faith in many situations is accomplished by doing and saying things according to a formula that might not have much to do at all with what Jesus did or would do.

So, what is the bottom line? What are we supposed to do to answer our call to be Christ to the world? How do we know what is right and true? Well, I would suggest that, if you need some 'churchy' words with which to start, you might read through The Catechism in the back of the Book of Common Prayer, starting on p. 845. It's divided into sections, each one with questions and answers about a particular subject. I would also recommend the Baptismal Covenant and the questions following, on pages 304-305.

These words won't make decisions for us; we have to do that for ourselves. But these words will guide us. These words hold truth. And unlike Jack Nicholson's line in *A Few Good Men*, we CAN handle the truth.

Speaking the truth can be hard, but the truth also has this remarkable quality: it sets us free. And, it brings us life in union with God. Thanks be.