



## Offended? Good!

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Claire Nevin-Field  
Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost~August 26, 2018*

### **Joshua 24:1-2a,14-18**

Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem, and summoned the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel; and they presented themselves before God. And Joshua said to all the people, "Now therefore revere the Lord, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. Now if you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord." Then the people answered, "Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods; for it is the Lord our God who brought us and our ancestors up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and who did those great signs in our sight. He protected us along all the way that we went, and among all the peoples through whom we passed; and the Lord drove out before us all the peoples, the Amorites who lived in the land. Therefore we also will serve the Lord, for he is our God."

### **Psalms 34:15-22**

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| 15 The eyes of God are upon the righteous, *<br>and the ears of God are open to their cry.                | 19 Many are the troubles of the righteous, *<br>but God will deliver them out of them all.            |
| 16 The face of God is against those who do evil, *<br>to root out the remembrance of them from the earth. | 20 God will keep safe all their bones; *<br>not one of them shall be broken.                          |
| 17 The righteous cry, and God hears them *<br>and delivers them from all their troubles.                  | 21 Evil shall slay the wicked, *<br>and those who hate the righteous will be punished.                |
| 18 God is near to the brokenhearted *<br>and will save those whose spirits are crushed.                   | 22 O God, you will ransom the life of your servants, *<br>and none will be punished who trust in you. |

### **Ephesians 6:10-20**

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints. Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak.

### **John 6:56-69**

Jesus said, "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. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever." He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum. When many of his disciples heard it, they said, "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?" But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining

about it, said to them, "Does this offend you? Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. But among you there are some who do not believe." For Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe, and who was the one that would betray him. And he said, "For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father." Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. So Jesus asked the twelve, "Do you also wish to go away?" Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."

Jesus was not nice-much of what he had to say, much of what he did, was offensive to his disciples, and to us. Gentle, nice people do not end up on a cross. In the last few weeks worth of readings Jesus seemed to be saying that he himself was God's own manna, come down from above to give life to the world. That doesn't really offend us, but to his first hearers, it was offensive. Last week we heard him tell his disciples that if they wanted eternal life, they had to gnaw on his flesh and guzzle his blood (that is how the text actually reads)—butcher shop talk not church talk. So it is no wonder his disciples began to "murmur" among themselves—saying "this teaching is difficult". Jesus' response is, "Oh, you think that's tough? What if I was to float off heavenward and leave you all standing slack jawed with cricks in your necks watching me disappear from view?" He made it clear that if they were going to follow him they were going to have to give up their need to understand everything, or approve of everything he said and did, even when what he said and did offended them. They were going to have to trust him, even when what he said went against everything they had been taught. Their response is quite predictable. They had hoped he was going to sit down with them and come up with a list of pros and cons about following him, so they could make reasonable decisions about following or not. But instead they hear from him, "and by the way, don't think your following me is your decision at all." If you don't get it, don't blame me, God must not have chosen you. There was dead silence and then people started to get up and get out—a mass exodus. This is just offensive. And then there are just the 12 left and Jesus turns to them and says, I imagine with great sadness, "and what about you, are you going to leave as well?"

This is one of those many times I find it easy to get on my high horse and feel superior to those disciples who fled—faithless louts. But really, I think I am, we are, not all that different from them—they who had kept trying and trying, waiting, watching and worrying and had finally grown tired—maybe couldn't really see any more what was so great about Jesus in the first place. So they leave. Who really can blame them? Haven't we all had those moments where we really just wonder if our belief in Jesus, in God, has been misplaced? Right after my Dad died I wondered if it was all nonsense—struggled with belief in God—in the resurrection. Maybe it was the same for you after someone you loved died. Or maybe it was in the middle of the night sitting by the bed of your child who is really, really sick and wondering why—how can this be so? Or wondering if your marriage is over. Or if you are about to get fired from your job, or standing in the unemployment line wondering if you will ever find a job again. Sometimes the trigger is a particularly nasty church fight. At times like these, I think we are tempted to conclude that the promises we trusted were empty and our faith was misplaced. Some people will make a decision to renounce faith and will clearly and definitively leave church. Some people don't make a decision overtly but kind of drift away, stop coming to church, stop praying and giving. Not a pretty picture of the life of faith, but an accurate one. Disbelief happens. Taking offense happens. Jesus' demands are hard and sustaining a life of faith is work. To be clear, there are times the church—either a particular community, or a denomination, does something that is so completely un-Christ-like that it is leave-worthy. Something so egregious that an individual or the institution must be held accountable, must be forced to change, or it should be abandoned. We are seeing this tragically, horrifically, and clearly right now with the Roman Catholic Church—abuse of children by clergy and the widespread cover up. This is indefensible on any level. And that institution needs to do some serious soul searching and radical restructuring. And it is justifiable that in the wake of this ongoing barrage of revelations people leave church. It is also important to remember that there is no denomination, including our own, that is scandal free and perfect, and no particular church or denomination "owns" God-leaving a particular church is not necessarily the same as losing faith.

But then we hear Peter blurt out, yes but even with all of this hard, offensive stuff, "to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life". I understand why a whole lot of them left, but why did Peter stay? Where did he and the others who stayed get their faith? It certainly wasn't because Peter or the others were superhuman flawless faith giants. Quite the contrary—they are consistently doing dumb things and failing to see who and what Jesus is. They were afraid and doubted. They ran away from him in his time of trial. So what is it about them that made them stay? The clue is in Peter's words. "To whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life". Peter, you see, knew where to look. He knew exactly on whom to fix his eyes and not let go.

This, according to many Christians over the last 2000 years, and despite its many flaws, is why church is so important—because the church reminds us where we need to fix our eyes. Yes, every day church can be a frustrating institution—as Anglican mystic Evelyn Underhill wrote, "the church is an "essential service" like the post office, but there will always be some narrow, irritating and inadequate officials behind the counter and you will always be tempted to exasperation by them". But church is important because each and every week since the first century, God's people have gathered as church to hear scripture, to preach the Gospel, to share the sacraments—to hear again the words of eternal life—to shore up the sometimes fragile faith of those who, on

good days, believe. The church has gathered to be encountered by Jesus in the bread and wine, in the faces of its members. It is here that Jesus' real presence is seen and felt, is made manifest. We know that in the middle of a sometimes crazy and frightening world, here we can look and know we will find God in Christ.

To be sure, the church does not own God, God does not live in our beautiful buildings, never leaving the doors. We read God in nature, encounter God in our daily lives—the world is filled with the presence of that restless creator who is constantly creating, renewing and sustaining all that is. But it is here in church, though the rhythm of our prayer together, in our sacramental life together, in our relationships with each other and our shared service to the world in Christ's name, that we re-member who we are—the Body of Christ—given for the world. It is here that we often clearly see and hear God—feel God's presence. Here that we cling together in times of sadness and celebration. Here that we know our life has purpose and meaning. It is through our common worship that we receive the promise, in our hands and in our mouths, that Jesus is indeed the bread of life.

The church is not perfect—it never was and never will be. If you are waiting for that you will never be satisfied. Wherever people get together there will always be things that offend, always reasons to leave. But it is here, as the church, that we learn we need each other to save us from self-righteousness. We need each other to help keep us in shape for God. Because wherever God is God, there will always be things that offend. Like Jesus. Like fleshy bread and bloody wine. Like this church we call Christ's body in which we are grafted together just as surely as we are grafted to him. Do you sometimes want to go away? Of course you do. We all do. But where would we go? This is where we have heard the words of eternal life. This is where we have come to believe and know the Holy One of God. With treasures like these, there are few offenses we cannot bear.