

Sunday, August 25, 2024

First Lesson: 1 Peter 2: 2-3

Gospel Lesson: John 6: 56–69

Sermon Series: Read the Story: Go Deeper

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Good morning Beloved Community.

- We are continuing a 12-week journey through the sermon series "**Read the Story,**" focusing on the profound lessons found in the first epistle of Peter, tying in new gospels lessons each week continuing with the Gospel of John 6.
- This week we are looking at Reading the Story from the lens of **going deeper.**
- Beginning with the Wednesday Night Applying to Sermon Class that have finally met after a few weeks of not meeting, the class identified several areas in both scriptures of where they would like to go deeper in.
- Before unpacking these areas, I highly encourage you all to take a listen or read the past sermons since a lot of

the historical exegesis and background of these scriptures has been discussed in the earlier weeks.

- The first area where the class requested more conversation around was in the first Lesson of 1 Peter 2: 3 that states ***Cry out for this nourishment, ³ now that you have had a taste of the Lord's kindness.***
- The question that was raised is what is the Lord's kindness?
- How do we know when we have had a taste of this kindness?
- When we speak of the Divine's kindness from my perspective, we are referring to something more than just a general sense of goodwill.
- **It is a kindness** that is active, intentional, and deeply personal.
- **This kindness resembles** a gentle hand that holds us in our brokenness, the comforting presence that never abandons us, and the persistent whisper of grace that calls us back to wholeness.

- **The kindness of the Holy One** is evident in the way God sustains us, provides for us, and guides us, often in ways we might not immediately perceive.
- However this is where the Lord's kindness could be challenging for some of us to perceive—
- It is in our losses,
- Our failures,
- Our injustices,
- Our hardships,
- Our struggles—
- For I am aware that some people's stories would embody this thought, “ I can't seem to catch a break.”
- I have witnessed members in our community alone, suffering through losses and hardships that I would not wish upon anyone!
- I have read story lines of senseless tragedies that has happened in people's lives that literally causes the hair to raise on the back of arms.
- Thereby raising the million dollar question to God.....
“Why God....How God could You let this happen?!”

- I find that it is in the presence of suffering, injustice, and cruelty in the world— that often challenges our perception of this divine kindness.
- Thereby leading me to raise another question, how can we reconcile the kindness of the Holy with the harsh realities that confront us daily?
- This question has stirred the hearts of people throughout the ages.
- One way to approach this is to understand that the Divine’s kindness does not always manifest as the immediate alleviation of all hardships.
- Rather, **it is often found in the companionship** offered during our trials, in the patience shown toward our frailties, and in the promise that even in the midst of chaos, goodness is being interlaced into every fiber of our existence.
- **The companionship of God** is a gift that surrounds us in ways both subtle and profound, offering a sense of presence that can uplift and sustain us through every season of life.

- **This divine companionship** is not something distant or abstract but a deeply personal and intimate connection that we can sense around us and through others.
- There are moments in life when we feel the presence of the Holy One most clearly—in the stillness of the morning, in the beauty of a sunset, or in the quiet moments of reflection.
- It's as if the Divine breathes life into the world around us, filling the air with a sacred stillness that speaks to our hearts. **This my eyes is God's companionship**—a gentle reminder that we are never alone.
- Furthermore, this companionship is not limited to the natural world or to moments of solitude.
- It is also present in the relationships we cherish, in the love and support we receive from others.
- When we share a deep conversation with a friend, when someone offers a helping hand in times of need, or when we feel the warmth of a hug, we are experiencing the companionship of God through the people in our lives. In these moments, the Divine moves through others, wrapping us in love, comfort, and assurance.

- **Finally the companionship of God also manifests in the community**, where we come together to worship, to serve, and to support one another.
- In community, we find a reflection of God's presence as we join hands and hearts, walking together in faith.
- The shared prayers, the collective songs of praise, and the acts of service all bear witness to the divine companionship that binds us together.
- This sense of companionship extends beyond the good times and into the challenges we face.
- In our darkest moments, when we feel lost or overwhelmed, the companionship of God is often revealed through the kindness of others, through words of encouragement, and through the quiet strength that helps us carry on.
- It is in these times that we discover the depth of God's commitment to us, a love that does not abandon but walks with us, no matter how difficult the journey.
- **Tying in our gospel this morning, in going deeper**, I am seeing this same theme of companionship in the beginning of the passage particularly.

- In the verses, where Jesus says: "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."
- These words invite us into a deep reflection on what it means to be in true companionship with Christ—a relationship that goes beyond mere presence and enters into a union of being.
- The language as I named last week of "eating my flesh and drinking my blood" can be startling and off putting at first glance for some, powerfully conveys this idea of an intimate communion.
- In this passage, Jesus is not only offering Himself to us in a symbolic way but is inviting us into a relationship that is as vital and sustaining as the food we eat and the water we drink. This is a companionship that nourishes our very souls, offering spiritual sustenance that leads to eternal life.

- To "abide in" Christ, as Christ abides in us, speaks of a mutual indwelling—a closeness that is both spiritual and transformative. **This is not just a relationship of proximity but one of deep connection.**
- Christ is not merely with us; Christ is within us, shaping and guiding our lives.
- This abiding presence is what sustains us, allowing us to live in the fullness of life that God intends.
- **Going deeper**, another area where the Wednesday Night Class had questions are in verses 58-60 that says, *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."*

59 He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum.

60 When many of his disciples heard it, they said, "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?"

- Again, in our prior conversations over these past few weeks, I have spent a lot of time defining bread, and so I invite us all to revisit those conversations.

- However, what I will name in these verses that I find to be most interesting is that in the roughly 3 weeks we have talked about Christ being this “living bread” that goes beyond physical nourishment, I would bet that this community in our story has had several weeks even months hearing some of the same ideas from Jesus and others, and now it is in these verses we get to see the community respond back.
- Their response was to complain and say "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?"
- What our Wednesday class was most interested in was why was the teaching difficult for the people?
- Was the teaching difficult because they did not understand the content of what Jesus was trying to convey?
- Or was the teaching difficult because it was something that the people didn't want to hear?
- Also I would add to this question to ask which part of this teaching was difficult for the people to understand?
- Was it the blood and body portion of the Holy Communion section?

- **My answer would be yes...**From a cultural and social perspective, Jesus' words were provocative.
- The metaphor of eating flesh and drinking blood not only sounded grotesque but also clashed with the Jewish purity laws and sensibilities.
- This idea of ingesting flesh and blood, even symbolically, was repugnant and scandalous to His Jewish audience.
- Moreover, Jesus was challenging the expectations of the Messiah that many held. They anticipated a political savior who would liberate them from Roman oppression and restore Israel's national glory. Instead, Jesus offered a vision of salvation that was spiritual, sacrificial, and centered on His identity as the Son of God.
- This teaching threatened to upend their understanding of religious and social order, making it difficult for them to reconcile their expectations with the reality of what Jesus was offering.
- Furthermore we know that the "living bread" talk that occurs throughout this passage for consideration was **definitely difficult** for the people then and perhaps for the people now.

- It would be human nature to find this section of the gospel most difficult to both accept, digest, understand and fully comprehend because I will reiterate from last week...we all have basic needs—food, shelter, clothing, warmth, air and the list goes on and on.
- We also have then our desired wants, that sometimes takes over our basic needs!
- So for me, this would pose both an intellectual and emotional struggle within a lot of us.
- Intellectually, Jesus' teaching demanded a leap of faith that was difficult for many to make.
- It required Jesus followers to move beyond a literal interpretation of His words and embrace a deeper, more mystical understanding of who He was and what He came to do.
- This idea of eternal life through spiritual union with Christ was a new and challenging concept, one that required trust in Jesus' identity as the incarnate Word of God.
- Emotionally, this teaching struck at the core of their beliefs, their traditions, and their sense of security.

- It was unsettling and disorienting, causing many to question whether they could continue following someone who was asking them to accept something so radical.
- On a personal and relational level, Jesus' teaching demanded total commitment and surrender.
- To accept Jesus words meant not just intellectual agreement but a complete reorientation of one's life.
- It called for a deep, personal relationship with Jesus, one that required trust, loyalty, and the willingness to follow Him even when His path led to the cross.
- **For many, this was a bridge too far.**
- The personal cost of discipleship—potential alienation from family, community, and religious institutions—was daunting.
- Accepting Jesus' teaching meant breaking with the familiar and the comfortable, stepping into the unknown with faith that He was truly the way to eternal life.
- Thereby leading us to Jesus response to the people's complaints that can be found in vs 61 where Jesus says **"Does this offend you?"**

- For me this question is what keeps most preachers up at night especially if they are tasked to lead a congregation.
- One of my worst fears to date is that one day I will preach a sermon that is so offensive that every one will decide to get up and leave in the middle of the sermon and never return again.
- In my doctoral studies, I had a class where we were tasked to read, “How to Preach a Dangerous Sermon,” by Frank A. Thomas—another layer of proof that this is a valid concern for most teachers, preachers, communicators, public speakers and the list goes on and on.
- So the fact that Jesus confronts the listeners with this question, leaves me in awe— because I don’t care how thick a skin someone may think they have—it is in most of our human nature not to want to offend someone.
- And we see in our story, most of the community chose to leave....**because they were offended.**

- There have been many people in churches worldwide including in our very own Church, **who have chosen to leave because they were/are offended.**
- So what is Jesus response to the offended?
- What is our response to the offended?
- When confronted with the offense of His followers, Jesus does not soften His message or retract His words.
- Instead, Jesus challenges them further by asking, “Does this offend you? Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where He was before?” (John 6:61-62).
- Here, Jesus points beyond the immediate offense to the greater reality of His divine identity and mission.
- He is essentially saying that if they are struggling with this teaching, how much more will they struggle with the fullness of His revelation—the cross, the resurrection, and the ascension.
- Jesus is not merely concerned with whether His words are palatable; Jesus is calling His followers to a deeper understanding and to a faith that transcends their current discomfort.

- For as I step out of this passage, I think about the other section of individuals whose offense have not been explicitly named but it is implicit in Jesus mission.
- In a world marked by profound disparities—whether due to race, mental health challenges, economic status, or any other aspect of identity, who have found themselves navigating systems that do not fully recognize their humanity or meet their needs—the justice seeker that I am will declare **that these sections of our societies are offended too.**
- The struggling families trying to make a dollar out of 15 cents—I would wager to suggest that **they are offended too.**
- The same can be said for those marginalized due to economic status, gender, sexual orientation, disability, or any other identity that deviates from the dominant norm —**they are offended too.**
- It is essential for those of us who recognize these injustices to not only empathize but also to act which part of that challenges us to go deeper.

- **Go deeper** in our faith until God’s story of love is fully told to include us all!
- **Go deeper** in our conversations until our inclusive words are met with inclusive actions!
- **Go deeper** in our walk and work until the blind can see, until the prisoner is set free, until the silenced can speak, until the downtrodden can stand...
- **We must go deeper** as a community until our faith reflects a world where all can experience the fullness of life!
- This is not just a lofty ideal but a mandate—one that we must pursue with all our hearts, minds, and souls until thy kingdom come, thy will be done in Earth as it is heaven—let the Beloved Community of Lincoln First say Amen!

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