

First, a couple of comments about today's reading from St. Paul. This has been a grossly misunderstood reading throughout the centuries. The biggest point is to make sure that we get the very first line: "DEFER TO ONE ANOTHER OUT OF REVERENCE FOR CHRIST." This has nothing to do with a husband having control over his wife. It has to do with a freely given act of DEFERENCE, lovingly deferring our own needs for the sake of the other. In the culture of the day, husbands had complete control over everything – even life itself – in their household. This passage would have knocked the socks off the men who read it because Paul was turning that worldview upside down and inside out. The HUSBANDS are actually given the more difficult charge here by Paul. Husbands are to love their wives as Christ loved the Church, which is to the point of being willing to lay down their lives for them. Such a loving husband could never in any way control or manipulate or abuse his wife. Any other interpretation of this text is simply not tenable. Period. Anyone using this to boss his wife around is completely off base. This text has to do with LOVE.

OK, had to get that out of the way. I'd like to look at this gospel, where we finish up this BREAD OF LIFE DISCOURSE from the 6<sup>th</sup> chapter of John. It's a little like the story told about a man whose wife brought home a monkey from the pet store. He said he didn't want a monkey in his house, so he objected.

"Where is he going to eat?" the man asked.

"At our table," replied the wife.

"Where is he going to sleep?" the husband inquired.

"In our bed," said his wife.

"What about the odor?" the man demanded.

"I got used to you, and I guess the monkey can too," replied his wife. We are all invited to this table. That's the message. But sometimes the odor is a bit difficult to take. Sometimes our dining companions rub us the wrong way; some we don't agree with politically, and some have hurt us – and we have hurt them. And the words of Jesus are downright tough. This 6<sup>th</sup> chapter is full of statements that were offensive to those who heard them. First Jesus suggested that He was God's own manna come down from heaven to give life to the world. We are used to hearing that sort of thing from Jesus, but imagine hearing it for the first time – from a human being who does not look all that different from us – "I am the living bread come down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever." It's easy to see how people thought Jesus was 3 fries short of a HAPPY MEAL.

Last week, Jesus took the offense to an even higher level by choosing really gory words to describe what He meant. The actual translation is "Those who GNAW on my flesh and SLURP my blood have eternal life; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink."

It is a crude image that sounds more like something from THE BUTCHER SHOP on Kildaire Farm Road than from a church. (Do you think I'll get a free steak out of my advertisement?!) We can understand why Jesus' followers began to pull away from Him at that point. Instead of making it easier for them to understand, Jesus pushes even further. "Does this offend you?" *What if I were to float up into the sky right now and leave you with nothing but cricks in your necks?* Which is the gist of what He said. Jesus simply would not let up on them. If they were going to follow Him all the way, then they were going to have to give up their

need to understand, agree, or approve of everything He said or did. GOT THAT?! They had to give up their need to understand, agree, or approve of everything He said or did. They were going to have to believe Him, even when what He said offended them. They were going to have to trust Him, even when what He did went against everything they had been taught.

We can almost hear their minds slam shut. They had hoped He was going to explain things to them so they could make reasonable decisions about how best to follow Him. Instead He let them know that nothing, not even their belonging to Him, was theirs to decide. “For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father,” He said. *If you don’t get it, don’t blame me. God must not have chosen you,* Which is the substance of His response.

There must have been a terribly sad look on His face when He said that, a terribly sad sound to His voice, because plenty of His disciples turned around and left right then. For all we know, one or two of them spat on the ground as they did, while others simply shook their heads and walked away. At least 12 stayed, because according to John, Jesus asked THE TWELVE, “Do you want to leave me too?” They were free to go, but Peter answered for them all, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You alone have the words of eternal life.”

Those are such heart-wrenching words. We can hear the emotion in them. Peter is as offended as anyone else by what Jesus has said. Of all the disciples, he is the one who stands up for traditional faith. He keeps the dietary laws. He never eats forbidden things, including any kind of meat with the blood still in it. The idea of gnawing flesh and slurping blood turns his stomach as badly as it does ours, but where is he to go? As confusing as Jesus is, Peter has glimpsed something in Him that he cannot turn away from. He has glimpsed God in Jesus, and if trusting that means struggling with a whole lot of difficult – even distasteful things that go with it, then Peter will struggle. He will not give up the truth he has found, even if it comes tucked in a box full of spiders. He will not go away from the life he has been led to, even if it is miles from the life he thought he wanted.

We can resonate with his words down to this very day, when so many people are wary of allying themselves with imperfect communities of faith. I hear it all the time. “If the church doesn’t do something about that, then I am leaving.” Or, “I cannot belong to a church that does that.” Or, “I don’t go to church anymore. I couldn’t take anymore of the 1) hypocrisy 2) sexism 3) liberals 4) conservatives 5) fundraising 6) lousy 3 point preaching 7) insistence on welcoming the immigrant and serving the poor 8) cold atmosphere 9) fill in the blank.”

There ARE good reasons to leave a church. There are probably even some good reasons to leave the church altogether, but when the main reason is that I cannot find a church that agrees with me on everything from what kind of music we should sing to where we should stand on the death penalty and how we should receive communion during a pandemic, then I have the perfect excuse never to belong to a church with more than one member – ME.

There is no perfect church, any more than there is a perfect God, if by perfect we mean that I understand, agree, or approve of everything that goes on. If we become a Christian, we get a Bible that says that we are to treat the poor like Christ. We get a household code that says husbands and wives have to DEFER TO ONE ANOTHER IN LOVE. We also get the parable of the prodigal son, the 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm, and “God so loved the world that He sent His only begotten son.”

If we become a Catholic Christian, we get an international church with all the usual bureaucracy. We get bishops whose job it is to conserve a tradition and people who fight like Catholic cats in a sack about every

subject we can think of. We get Pope Benedict and Pope Francis, theologians on the far left and far right. We also get liturgies so lovely they can take our breath away, a fabulous wisdom and mystical tradition that invites us to fall deeply in love with God – and a commitment to the poor and needy that puts all our divisions to shame.

Wherever people are people, there will always be things that offend. Some of them are things we should pursue until we get some agreement on them, and others we should probably leave alone – so that they can go on reminding us that God's ways are not our ways, that there are other people in this world, just as sincere as we are, who do not see things our way. One of my professors used to say, "Never try to solve a problem in the church that has not been solved in the last 2000 years." Good advice. We're dealing with mystery here. And we'll never get our arms or heads wrapped around the whole enchilada. Also, arguing and fighting about all of these things is a perpetual distraction from the ONE thing, the MAIN thing, the ONLY thing – and that is love of God and love of neighbor. If we could get that right – everything else would shake out in due course.

We need each other, to save us from self-righteousness. We also 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 the Church we call Christ's Body, in which we are grafted to each other as surely as we are grafted to Him.

It reminds me of a line by Wally Kuhn, who loves to say about churches: "All the boats leak. You've just got to find the boat that leaks least." To my mind, for all its holes and bilge and frequent craziness, the least leaky boat is the barque of Peter, the Catholic Church. Where else can we go? Here we hear the words of eternal life.

It's like a preacher who said to a young man: "Why are you a Baptist?" "Because my mother and father were Baptists."

"Now, son, that's not much of a reason. If your father and mother were idiots – would you be an idiot?"

"No sir, if my father and mother were idiots – then I'd be a Catholic!" WELL HERE I AM!

You know for all of its idiocy, I really love the Catholic church, and I love being Catholic, and a Catholic priest. In the course of my 42 years of priesthood, I have seen more corruption in the Church than you have read of. I have tasted it. I have been reasonably corrupt myself. And yet I love this church, this living, pulsing, sinning people of God, love it with a passion. WHY? For all the Catholic hate, clericalism and sexism I experience here a community of love. For all the institutional idiocy, I find here a tradition of wisdom. For all the individual repressions, I breathe here an air of freedom. For all the fear of sexuality, I discover here the redemption of my body. In an age that can be so inhuman, I touch here tears of compassion. In a world so frequently grim and humorless, I share here rich joy and earthy laughter. In a culture of death, I hear here an incomparable stress on life. For all the apparent absence of God, I sense here the real presence of Christ. (Adapted from Walter Burghardt)

Do you also wish to go away sometimes? I do. We all do. But where else 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 at hand, where else would we go? And I'm glad you are here. You are THE REASON why I stay. Thank you. Thank God. Amen. (Overall homily structure and idea adapted from Barbara Brown Taylor, HOME BY ANOTHER WAY, p. 174-179)