



ST BART'S

A SERMON by:

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What if Jesus Had a Publicist?

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, August 19, 2012

The Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

Based on John 6:51-58

What if Jesus had a publicist? You know the kind, the ones hired to cultivate the campaigns and guard the reputations of every celebrity and politician in our world. If Jesus had had a publicist, it would be at this moment in the sixth chapter of the Gospel of John when that publicist would be saying something like this. "I've had enough, Jesus! Your message is too harsh! No one is going to get it! And you know what, I don't get it either. You had such promise, Jesus. Who would have thought that someone from a podunk town like Nazareth could have been such a good preacher! And funny, too! A "good" Samaritan! That's rich. And telling that know-it-all Pharisee that he needs to be born a second time. I'm still laughing at that one! You have been trending very well ever since you turned all that water into wine at that wedding in Cana. The party people love you for that. And then the healings! That guy that you made walk again, they had to tear the roof off to get him to you. And the nobleman's son that you saved from death. Great move, Jesus. You've got friends in high places now. This was something I could work with.

"I came out to hear you for myself in Capernaum. It was the Sabbath and you were preaching in the synagogue. You were great, but it was standing room only and I had to strain to see you from the door. After the service, I approached you, saying that I'd like to be your publicist, and you warmly agreed.

"I don't like to brag, but it was my idea that you take all of that crowd outside the synagogue, take them to the hills outside of town, and preach there. And what a move! Ten thousand people, at least, came out to see you. And you nailed it. You really had them in the palm of your hand.

Things were looking a little dicey when you ran through dinnertime. But that stunt you pulled with the kid's lunch of loaves and fishes, I don't know how you did it. But everyone ate their fill! And the crowd went wild! They were ready, right then and there, to make you king. King!

"You know you would have toppled Herod. Easily. Most everyone hates that traitor. And we'd finally have had a fighting chance against those dirty Roman pigs.

"But what did you do? You threw away the crown. You ran away. To be alone. To pray. Big mistake. You know I respect your spiritual disciplines, but that was your shot, Jesus! And you flinched. Everybody was crestfallen, myself included. But, I was willing to give a brother a second chance. And so I stuck with you. To work on your comeback.

"If we had kept feeding thousands of people again and again, if we had just kept doing that, we could've gotten your groove back. People would be happy, you could preach and feed, change the world, you'd be our king in no time, and I'd be the guy who got you there.

"But then when you came back from your prayer on that hilltop you started undermining yourself. You started criticizing your base. You complained that people weren't following you because of signs from heaven, but people were only following you because they had full bellies. Yes, you were probably right. But you have to start somewhere, Jesus.

"What did you say, 'Don't work for the food that doesn't last, but work for the food that endures for eternal life.' 'The food that doesn't last'? You fed thousands upon thousands. We could've fed millions together. But that wasn't enough for you. You had to feed their souls.

"People were comparing you to Moses. And you really should have run with that. But, no. You had to distinguish yourself. You denied being like Moses. You said you were like the manna that God provided to Moses and his people as they wandered in the wilderness, that you were bread like that. But, you seemed to suggest you were better than the manna of Moses! Now that is pushing it! How did you put it? 'For whoever comes to you,' you said, 'will never be hungry again.' And 'This isn't like the bread your ancestors ate, and then they died. Whoever eats this bread will live forever.'

"Sure. You can be bread. It is a fine metaphor. I would have avoided the whole Moses comparison, but it is what it is.

“But then you went over the edge, Jesus. Really. You are really making it so hard for me to do my job. How am I supposed to spin this? And I quote: ‘I assure you, unless you eat of the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day.’ And then you say it again. You just keep saying it! ‘My flesh is the true food and my blood is the true drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in them.’ Disgusting! And then you close with: ‘As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me lives because of me.’ Well, that softens it a bit, but still. What are they going to say about us now? What are we? Cannibals? Vampires? Zombies? People don’t eat people Jesus. It just isn’t done. Who am I kidding, we devour each other all the time, but we don’t ever talk about it out loud!

“<Sigh> I’m sorry, Jesus. The crowds were spooked by this. It is too much. They’ll never be back in the numbers you used to draw. And you know what, I tried to book you at the Capernaum synagogue, and they won’t even let you preach there anymore. Some of them want you dead! My advice is that you take your hardcore fans, especially those 12 good-for-nothings who insist on following you everywhere, take them and get out of town. But, honestly, nowhere is safe for you anymore. <Sigh> All that talent, wasted. To think of what we could have done together! I’m sorry, Jesus, but I quit!”

At the end of the sixth chapter, we read that there were many like my supposed publicist who left Jesus when he started talking about the need for people to eat his flesh and drink his blood. But the 12 disciples stayed. There’s an exchange where Jesus asks the disciples whether they want to leave, as well. But they decide to stay. Peter speaks for the group: “Lord, where are we going to go? You speak of eternal life. We believe and know that you are God’s holy one.”

His commitment to the truth, and the true nourishment of God, had him turning from the glory of celebrity and the promise of political power, to a focus on eternal things, opening himself up for conspirators to destroy him. I want to remind you of the sheer scandal that Jesus brought to the table. Those of us who are in this tradition rarely register the shocking and disgusting language that attends Holy Communion. It is language that is meant to wake us up. To snap us out of it.

In his preaching in John, he asked for us to eat him and drink his blood. In other Gospels, at his final meal before he is murdered, he brings himself to the dinner table. To take his body into ourselves like bread. And to take his blood into us like wine. In a city that is going to eat him alive for being a man of God, Jesus asks us to eat him so that we might have life, and that we might have his spirit and his eternal life in us. So that we might become his Body, an extension of his very self. He is not asking us to be cannibals. He is actually calling us away from the brutality of the world, the cannibalism of the world, all the patterns of life that have us eating each other, and destroying one another, all for the sake of status or political power or fleeting security. All that collateral damage as we claim the thrones of the world. Take me, instead, Christ pleads.

Feed on me. Feed on God, instead of each other. He offers us his entire self, God’s full presence, in commitment to the truth, God’s healing, God’s love of every person, and his epic demonstration from the cross of unremitting forgiveness, even for the ones who kill him. He is offering us *that* Body and Spirit, that Bread and Wine, to be our guide and nourishment, to be our true food and drink. Because everything else, every other food, won’t last for long. But what we have seen in our Lord Jesus, and what we will taste together from this table in a few moments, this will last till Kingdom come.

It is Lady Wisdom from Proverbs who prefigures all of this. She prepares a feast and says to us: “You that are simple, come on in! You that are without sense, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed. Lay aside immaturity and live, and walk in the way of Wisdom.”

So may we not shy away from the vivid words of our Lord, who hopes that we might not only eat the bread of Wisdom, but that we might eat Wisdom herself. May we not turn from Christ, as did the publicist, when the scandal of following Christ becomes too great. May we join with the disciples and Peter to say: “Lord, where else are we going to go?”

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

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