



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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Shock Value

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, August 15, 2021

The Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

Proverbs 9:1-6; Ephesians 5:15-20; John 6:51-58

Let us pray.

We awaken in Christ's body,
As Christ awakens in our bodies
There I look down and my poor hand is Christ
He enters my foot and is infinitely me.
I move my hand and wonderfully
My hand becomes Christ,
Becomes all of Him.
I move my foot and at once
He appears in a flash of lightning.
Do my words seem blasphemous to you?
Then open your heart to him.
And let yourself receive the one
Who is opening to you so deeply.ⁱ
Amen.

Over the past few weeks, I spent some time watching the Olympics. I really enjoyed seeing the world's premier athletes perform at the top of their game, especially under such difficult circumstances this year. One thing I noticed, that for some reason I had never paid attention to before, was that right before their events, some of the athletes would slap themselves on their arms and legs to get pumped up and motivated before they took their marks on the track or dove into the pool. There was even one controversial video that went viral on the internet of a judo athlete, Martyna Trajdos, being shaken and slapped in the face by her coach as she was about to enter the ring. Needless to say, there was a lot of outcry about a coach hitting an athlete in the face like that, but Trajdos spoke up right away to defend him, saying that this was part of her pre-competition ritual and that she had *asked* him to do that to help her get her head in the game. She said, "I need this before my fights to be awake."

I'm not sure that kind of motivation would work for everyone, and I'm certainly not going to start slapping myself in the face before I climb the pulpit to preach. But I do understand the impulse to get your head in the game, the desire to be fully awake and alert, and that sometimes we need help to snap us out of our ordinary, day-to-day mindset. And sometimes we *need* to be shaken up, even shocked into new awareness, so we can be fully present to what is going on and respond accordingly.

Listening to our Gospel reading, I wonder if Jesus was trying to shake people up, to shock them awake with the startling words we hear him say. After feeding the people with bread and fish and then methodically walking them through what it all means, he arrives at this climactic moment of this teaching.

As we've journeyed together through the bread of life discourse these past few weeks, we've seen how Jesus has built up to this stunning conclusion. He has fed his people with literal food. He has told them that he is the source of the food that endures, and he has rooted his lesson in the familiar story of manna in the wilderness. But now he throws them a curve. He tells them that this bread he will give for the life of the world is his flesh. "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."

With this shocking statement, Jesus has left metaphor and analogy behind. And he has stepped into forbidden territory, telling his Jewish followers that to receive life, they must eat his flesh and drink his blood. This was not only repugnant to them, it was offensive because of the religious prohibition of eating the blood of an animal with its flesh.

When we first hear Jesus' words, they are shocking and repellent to us, too. But we understand that he can't possibly have meant that literally, so we search for his deeper meaning. We would be right to recognize the eucharistic overtones of his message, of receiving the body and blood in the bread and wine of communion. And our minds may also settle on the easier-to-take metaphor of the bread of life that Jesus offers. All of this is certainly true. But I wonder if, in our discomfort with the words "eat my flesh and drink my blood," we may jump too quickly to try to explain them in a way that is more palatable.

Jesus did not come to make our lives more palatable. He came to give us eternal life. A life in Christ is demanding, and it is not always comfortable; and with these words of Jesus, we are invited to abide for a time in the discomfort. Because, in our eagerness to tone down Jesus' radical words, we run the risk of missing the more profound and even *more* radical message of the incarnation itself: that God, the giver of life and creator of the world, is present with us in Jesus, a living human being.

Jewish New Testament scholar Amy-Jill Levine writes that as modern listeners of Jesus' words, "we settle for easy interpretations." She calls this "auditory atrophy." "Our listening skills," Levine writes, "are not as developed as they should be ... and we frequently miss the original provocation."ⁱⁱⁱ But it is very often in Jesus' shocking words and his surprising stories that we get a glimpse of the life that he offers. Those moments where he invites us to a new way of seeing, or jolts into a new way of acting, or challenges us into a new way of responding.

Hearing Jesus' words, his early followers would not have made the theological leap to eucharist, as we do, but they would have understood that he didn't really mean they were to literally eat his flesh and drink his blood. So why did Jesus choose to speak so provocatively to the people? Why did he choose to use those words in the first place, knowing they would shock and offend?

Provocation was a part of the way Jesus operated. As much as he was the good shepherd who healed the sick and fed the poor and welcomed the outcast, he also told unsettling stories about the last being first and first being last. He did socially unacceptable things like having a long, theological discussion with a Samaritan woman at the well. And he traveled to transgressive places like Gentile cemeteries to exorcise demons. He said and did these things not just to shake up the status quo, but to show his followers a path to a different way of life—a proverbial slap in the face to wake them up to the possibility of abundant life and the reality of a living God among them. The things Jesus did and said were a shock to their sensibilities, a shock to their understanding of the world, and a shock to the religious and social system.

Some of his followers responded to this teaching by throwing up their hands and walking away. The offense was too much for them. The people who had followed him all the way to Capernaum and wanted to make him king were falling away, unable or unwilling to comprehend the reality of what Jesus was saying, and his many disciples were whittled down to twelve. When Jesus asks Peter if he is going to turn away from him, too, Peter responds almost plaintively, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of

eternal life." Peter may not yet fully understand who Jesus is. He may even find some of Jesus' teachings hard to take. But he also sees that, although the path is difficult, he has to stay. He chooses to abide with Jesus.

Just like Jesus' followers, sometimes, we need to be shaken up, too, to be shocked into new awareness. We've certainly had our fair share of those moments over the past year and a half. The pandemic has laid bare the inequities of our society and the inadequacies of our health care system. The video of George Floyd being killed at the hands of the police revealed in a horrifying 9 minutes and 29 seconds the reality of police brutality—shocking perhaps for white Americans, less shocking for people of color, who have known the reality of racism for a very long time. Then there's the news footage of wildfires, floods, and drought around the world that brings home to us the reality of climate change in a way we have never experienced before. These realities hit us like a slap in the face. They are hard to look at and harder still to deal with. As we awaken to these realities, it sometimes feels like we've been sleepwalking. And sometimes, reality seems too difficult to bear.

But to paraphrase the judo athlete Martyna Trajdos, we need these slaps in the face to be awake. We need to get our heads in the game. So what if, instead of turning away from these harsh realities, we sit with our discomfort? What if we abide with the shock and the pain? What if we abide with Jesus?

Maybe what Jesus is trying to teach us in this long discourse is not so much about food and drink, bread and wine, flesh and blood, but about our abiding in him and him in us, inviting us to become awake in him. Our communion with him is not only our personal communion with God, it is our communion with the body of Christ and with each other.

In the words of the 10th-century mystic Symeon the New Theologian, which I began this sermon with, when we awaken in Christ's body, Christ awakens in our bodies. We become the hands and feet of Christ in the world and awaken to God's abundant life. "Open your heart to him. And let yourself receive the one who is opening to you so deeply."

Amen.

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ⁱ Symeon the New Theologian, *Hymns of Divine Love* (California: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2012) Hymn 15.

ⁱⁱ Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2015) p. 18.