

Does This Offend You?

August 26, 2018

Besides our little detour back to the Gospel of Mark last week, we have been reading the sixth chapter of the Gospel of John for over a month now. We started with John's version of the feeding of the 5,000 and then Jesus launches into this long philosophical discourse.

Today, we reach the end. I must admit, I'm ready to be done. Jesus is even more explicit today in his bread of life discourse. He drills down one more time. He doesn't just say, "I am the bread of life." Now we hear, "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me and I in them."

When Jesus hears that a number of his disciples grumbled about this teaching, he asked, "Does this offend you?" The Gospel of John portrays a pretty "high Christology" of Jesus; that is, it portrays Jesus as having divine foreknowledge of what is going to happen much more so than the three synoptic gospels do. Still, when Jesus asks, "Does this offend you?" I always imagine that he's rather incredulous. "Really? Really? This is what you're going to allow yourself to be offended by? This is what's going to draw you away from my teachings?"

Let's step back for a moment. Remember that Jesus was living in a highly oppressive society with extreme polarity between the haves and the have-nots. The majority of people lived in squalor and had few opportunities. On top of that, the religious system has been growing ever more restrictive as the Jewish authorities try to appease their Roman occupiers. Jesus comes from a strict rule-based culture: yes or no; right or wrong; black or white. The way that you please God is by following the rules, even if those rules are restrictive, even if those rules do not lead to abundant life but may even continue to keep you and others subjugated.

In the bread of life, Jesus offers an alternative to all of that. He tells us, "Internalize my words, feast on my teachings, make my ways so much a part of you as the food that you eat, then you will no longer hunger and thirst, then you will do the Father's will, then you will live forever."

This brings us to our passage today. Jesus, wrapping things up, hears his followers grumbling and asks, "Does this offend you?" The abject poverty that you're living in doesn't offend you, but this does? The way that the poor and women are disproportionately burdened by the law doesn't offend you, but this does?

I often imagine Jesus at this point doing the "Home Alone" face.

By the time we read the bread of life in 2018, it's lost its edge. Dare I say that it's gone stale? I had to explain to you why it would have been offensive, but the question, "Does this offend you?" hangs in the air. In the Greek, the word is SKANDALIZEI. Does this scandalize you? Of course, this carries the question: What scandalizes us today?

Did you hear the story out of Argentina this week? An Argentine police officer, Celeste Alaya, was working as she heard the cries of a baby. The 6-month-old baby, as well as its siblings, had been brought in malnourished and weak. Alaya, the mother of a newborn herself, asked if she could breast feed the baby and hug it just to offer a little bit of compassion. She was allowed to

and, of course, the infant immediately stopped wailing. A colleague of hers took a picture and posted it on social media.

“I want to make public this great gesture of love that you made today with that baby who you did not know, but for whom you did not hesitate to act like a mother,” said Marcos Heredia who posted the image on Facebook. “Things like that are not seen every day.”

Sadly, along with praise, Alaya has been inundated with messages repudiating what she did, inundated by people who were offended. That same day that Celeste Alaya’s story made the news, other headlines included the stories of children at the border who had been taken from their parents still not reunited and the timeline for that is said to still be uncertain at best, the report of the Pennsylvania Catholic Church sex abuse grand jury, and the news that the White House had blocked a proposed election reform bill, a bill that would have simply meant better monitoring of election machines. Blocked.

Jesus asked, “Does this offend you?” and I ask, “What offends you?” We seem to be able to get up in arms at the drop of a hat. Why? Sadly, I’m afraid that all too often we are offended by change, by things that we don’t know or that are different than what we’ve come to expect.

A friend of mine said that her brother decided to join a church after decades of being away. The way that he found his new church is that he tried three and the first two he rejected because in the Lord’s Prayer they said ‘trespasses.’ Thank goodness for him that the third was a “debtor’s” church.

When you find yourself offended, ask: Is this because some deeply-held notion or long-held belief or practice is coming into question? Or, does this thing that offends me bring harm or lack of vitality to real people? Legitimate scandals break people and society down, while faux scandals rile us up and re-enfranchise our biases. When we’re offended, we need to ask ourselves: Does this expand compassion? Does it call us to be more loving and accepting, or, does it reinforce our previously held notions? Does it liberate? Free real people for a more vital life? Or, does it reinforce the boxes that society has constructed?

Theologian Richard Rohr says that, “Authentic spirituality is always about trying to change yourself. It is not about trying to change anyone else.” Or, as I read yesterday, stop being offended by Facebook posts, or a piece of art, or people displaying their affection, by what someone said to you. Be offended by war, poverty, greed, and injustice.

On Monday, a friend of mine who is a manager at a Goodwill store in Illinois shared this story. One of his employees asked him to come back to the loading dock because a donor had a question. She asked what Goodwill does with the revenue that they generate from their stores. Fair enough. He explained their workforce centers, vouchers, day programs, meals on wheels. She seemed uninterested in what he had to say. Then she asked if Goodwill helps gay people. He asked her to clarify, and she asked if the services Goodwill provides help gay people. When told that Goodwill does not discriminate, that they help anyone who needs it, she asked yet again, “Does that include gay people?” When my friend said, yes, that would include gay people, she said thanks for letting me know, turned around, got in her SUV, and drove off without leaving her donation.

That, my friends, is an example of misplaced offense. The story of the Argentine police officer who breast fed a starving baby to soothe it and offer compassion is an example of misplaced offense.

Friends, there is a time and place for being offended. I've named a couple of things today that I hope offend you, and if those don't, I hope you find some things that do. I'll help if you want. Things that constrict and constrain and hinder people from living vibrant, vital lives should be offensive, and in the name of the bread of life, I hope that you are offended and that you will pause for a moment to ask yourself whether you're offended because something would require you to stretch your worldview, or if it actually hurts real people. Of course, I also pray that you then proceed accordingly.

The Gospel of John tells us that many walked away from Jesus at this point. They walked away because they were offended by what he was saying. This week, my prayer for all of us is that we learn from their mistake. Alleluia and Amen.

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