

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

August 25, 2024

Offensive & Salvific Words

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Beloved by God, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Creator and our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

The disciples react to this teaching of Christ's, that he's been going on about for some time now, by calling it "difficult." As a translation choice that may be something of an understatement. The word in the Greek is *skléros* which means harsh, hard, or even violent. That word comes from the root *skelló* which means "dried out." This hard truth, that Jesus has been sharing for the length of this chapter, is dried out to the point of desiccation. This teaching is as hard as petrified wood.

After this complaint the disciples add what the NRSV translates as "who can accept it?"¹ Though we could also translate that as "who is able to hear it?" The disciples keep grumbling and complaining until Jesus confronts them with, "Does this offend you?"² Or, given the Greek word used, *skandalizei*, "Does this **scandalize** you?" Or "anger you," "shock you," "offend you," or even, "cause you to sin?"

This teaching is so difficult to hear that it may possibly lead people to a position of unbelief rather than belief. Perhaps this is why Jesus notes that "among you there are some who do not believe,"³ before confronting the twelve with "Do you also wish to go away?"⁴

What a question! Especially considering what the disciples have been through in this chapter. These twelve have watched as: loaves and fishes were multiplied into an abundance, the crowds tried to crown Jesus King leading him to hide away from them, Jesus walking on the storm-tossed sea in the midst of their terror, his teaching in the Capernaum synagogue, and all sorts of conflicts with various and sundry groups and people in this chapter.

Despite all that, these twelve have stuck with Jesus through all of this. Imagine the emotional highs and lows they've gone through! The excitement and incredulity

¹ John 6:60c (NRSVUE)

² John 6:61b

³ John 6:64

⁴ John 6:67b

while gathering up the extra baskets of fish and bread. The chaotic energy of the crowd as they seek to force Jesus into kingship. The confusion as Jesus slipped away to the mountain. The terror as the darkness and storm entraps them on the sea. The awkwardness of the conflict between Jesus and other leaders. They have been through a lot!

And then there are the teachings Jesus is providing! Eating his flesh? Drinking his blood? How bizarre! Coming down from the Father? The Son of Man Ascending? What would those poor followers have made of these things? Don't get me wrong, the teachings of Christ are powerful and beautiful. After all, Jesus is pointing at a deep an intimate abiding in one another. A communion which expresses Christ as all that we need...bread, bread of life.

But these teachings are hard! So hard! How can they even hear them? How can we even hear them? They're confusing and yes indeed, they're scandalous to us. So much of what God is about is scandalous to us. The radical grace upon grace. The never-ending mercy and forgiveness. The topsy-turvy priorities – lifting up the lowly and bringing down the mighty, filling the hungry and sending the rich away unsatisfied. The overabundance of life that comes from relationship with God. Connection and community, grounded in shared values. Wisdom and insight for healthy life together. Christ is showing the twelve the Kingdom of God!

Yet it's so hard for us who are so trapped in the world to perceive the Kingdom. It often seems too alien to us. And many do leave because they are scandalized. They prefer to hold onto their worldly perspective, clutching their pearls at the thought that access to God could be as easy as loving Christ back. Preferring the ability to judge others' actions over extending the unconditional grace given to us by God towards out neighbors.

Taking offense at Jesus continues to this day. There are so many who prefer to hold onto offended sensibilities grounded in American Civil Religion (which frequently masquerades as Christianity) rather than hear Christ's call to love God and love neighbor. The "not in my backyard" refrain, based on judgmental and backwards worldviews, so often trumps even the most minimal attempt to help people who need it.

It's so self-defeating! Jesus is showing his followers, he is showing **us**, what the Kingdom of God is like. The Kingdom that God is drawing us towards on the Way of Christ. The new reality of the in-dwelling of the divine in us; the new reality that we can catch glimpses of in this one. Jesus is establishing a new Kingdom, one with a place for each and every one of us. Will we continue on the Way of Christ, guided by

the Spirit? Or will the scandal of God's abundant life and grace for the cosmos turn our feet from the Way?

At the start of this chapter Jesus, seeing the need of the crowd provides enough food for all with plenty leftover for any stragglers. Why would it be any different in the rest of the chapter? Jesus, seeing the need of the world, provides enough salvation for all, with plenty leftover for any stragglers. How heartbreaking it must have been for Christ to see as "many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him."⁵ They preferred the comfort of the status quo over the grace of God being provided to any and all. They preferred the power of judgement over the call to vulnerability and service.

Comfort and power...two of the strongest temptations we encounter. And two of the most entrenched in our lives and our societies. Perhaps the scandal is necessary in order to shock us out of comfort and complacency. Offense can shock our perception in challenging ways.

"The truth is not the truth until it becomes a scandal."⁶ Kierkegaard believed that true faith is not merely intellectual assent, but a personal commitment that involves a leap of faith. This leap often requires overcoming the scandal of the truth, which can challenge our existing beliefs and assumptions. True understanding of life's profound questions often requires a confrontation with our existing beliefs and assumptions.

How has God made you uncomfortable? Has scripture ever scandalized you? I bet it has at some pint or another! How about Matthew 19:24, "Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." Or Luke 18:22, "When Jesus heard this, he said to him, 'There is still one thing lacking. Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.'" Those verses make me rather uncomfortable, how about you? Or the entirety of Matthew chapter 25 for that matter! And plenty of others too. These scandalous verses tend to have to do primarily with loving and serving our neighbors and not hoarding wealth or power. Which, while scandalous to us, is precisely what the Kingdom of God is about.

The disciples, initially offended and confused, ultimately recognize the profound truth contained within Jesus' words. Peter declares to Jesus, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life." What a powerful example of a faithful response to the scandalous teachings of Christ!

⁵ John 6:66b

⁶ Kierkegaard, Søren. *Either/Or*. Translated by David Swenson. Princeton University Press, 1941.

The scandal of Jesus' message is not meant to be a barrier to faith, but rather, a catalyst for it. It challenges our preconceived notions, forces us to confront our own shortcomings, and invites us to embrace a radical new Way of living. The Kingdom of God, as revealed by Jesus, is a place of love, forgiveness, and mutual aid, where all are welcome and valued.

As we continue to follow Jesus' Way, we may encounter discomfort, offense, and even scandal. However, it is through these challenges that we can deepen our understanding of God's love and grace. By embracing the scandal of God's Kingdom, we can step further into it and experience the fullness of life that we were created for. Amen.