

Proper 16B: John 6:56-69  
Church of the Good Shepherd  
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### Shifting Realities

Charles Amjad-Ali was born in Pakistan. His mother is Hindu. His father is Muslim. Charles grew up Muslim, but he became Christian and later taught at a Lutheran seminary. Part of what intrigued Charles about Christianity was its absurdness. It was either the biggest joke in the world, or else it had to be true.

Those of us who have been Christian our whole life take a lot about Christianity for granted, but to outsiders much of what we think is normal is crazy. And this craziness, this absurdness is part of what makes Christianity so hard to accept. Just as we see in this morning's gospel. "Jesus is bread." "Bread that came down from heaven!" "And we are supposed to eat—chomp—on this bread? Hearing statements like this for the first time, most people understandably have the reaction Charles had, "Good grief, what kind of lunatic is this man?"

And maybe Jesus was crazy, ever thought of that? The things he said, the things he did, even the way he was willing to sacrifice his life when he could have gotten out of it--those are not the things a normal person would do, not a sane one. We Christians act like it's normal for people to say things like, "You need to be born again" or "if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off," or "you should love your enemy and hate your mother and father," or "the way to greatness is to become a slave." It's absurd, crazy...unless you're a Christian.

I mean, we hear Jesus say "I am the bread of life" and "if you eat me, you will live forever," and we don't bat an eye. We think, "Oh, Jesus is talking about communion here, Holy Eucharist." But if you're not familiar with Jesus or with the sacraments of the church, as the disciples in today's story were not, you have to think this guy is bonkers. Sure, he has some nice things to say and he can do some really amazing tricks, but this is too much. This guy's mental, off his rocker, a few French fries short of a happy meal.

So why is it that we don't have this response? Why is it that when Jesus tells us to eat his flesh and drink his blood, we don't act like these disciples and walk away, saying, "it's been real but this is getting too weird"? Obviously, part of the reason is that we are familiar with it. We've heard it before, every Sunday, in fact. It doesn't shock us anymore. Even if you happen to find yourself wondering about what a strange thing this is to say, you look around on Sunday morning and see everyone else going along with it. So we figure this is normal.

In the movie, *The Truman Show*, Truman is a man who's been raised since birth in a fictional, contrived world created for him by a TV studio, which has been broadcasting his life, his every move for decades. The fictional producer of the show is asked in the movie why Truman has never come close to discovering the true nature of his world. The producer's answer is insightful. He says, "We accept the reality of the world with which we are presented." We accept the reality of the world with which we are presented.

For Christians, the reality presented to us is a world where the Creator of the universe cares so much about his broken creation, that He becomes part of it, becomes human in order to bring it back to rights, back to him. And we accept that Jesus is that God and that he gives himself to us, gives us his body and blood, in the bread and wine of communion.

This is our reality. But, of course, it is not the reality for everyone. If you are a Muslim or a materialist, a Buddhist or an atheist, God becoming human, becoming bread, is absurd. It makes no sense. We Christians can try to explain it to others, and it is just “crazy talk” to them. They have the same reaction as Jesus’ followers: “And we’re supposed to listen to this?”

The question I wonder about, though, is how the absurd statements of Jesus, the crazy teachings of Christianity, cease to be absurd and crazy for some people. Because it happens. People who previously lived according to another reality do become Christian, all the time. Indeed, the church would never have grown beyond the original twelve disciples if people were stuck in the reality with which they are presented. So *how* does that happen?

Looking at the biographies of a number of converts, people who were once living in a pagan or Muslim, scientific materialist or anarchist world, there seems to be two factors that contribute to conversion.

The first factor is when the plausibility of people’s reality has collapsed. That is to say, the way they are living, the frame they are looking through, the story they believe they are in, no longer works. It no longer makes sense. Like when Augustine of Hippo got burnt out on the glory-chasing, pleasure-seeking life he led, or when Ignatius of Loyola had to give up his ambitions of a glorious military career on account of an injury, or when Chuck Colson, a lawyer for Nixon, got arrested and jailed for his involvement in Watergate, or like when celebrities like Leo Tolstoy or Alice Cooper discover that fame and fortune, women and drugs is not all it’s cracked up to be. They achieved the things the world says are important, desirable but found they’re not enough. When this happens, when your world, the reality that you’ve built up, built your whole life around, comes crashing down, it’s disorienting, confusing, and scary. Ask anyone who had their marriage end, or their child become terminally ill, or their career fall apart. It’s like your world is ending, like falling through a hole in the ground, like drowning, like being flung into the abyss with nothing to hold on to.

Ok, maybe it’s not always so dramatic as that. Maybe it doesn’t all come crashing down at once. But, rather, you start seeing chinks in the surface, cracks in reality. Nothing cataclysmic happens, but instead it’s like following breadcrumbs, asking questions you never had before, thinking thoughts you never thought before. Whether it happens gradually or all at once, the reality now seems too small, too constraining, doesn’t fit with what you’ve come to know, and you find yourself wondering if there’s not something more.

This is where the other factor comes in, where God comes in. Because it’s not enough to grow out of the old framework, to have your idols smashed. You need something to replace it, a new framework. And that new reality is God.

What is curious though is that in a lot of conversion stories, the converts never really hit a rock-bottom. Their world never collapsed. Rather, what happened was that God just broke in, appeared to people, spoke to them out of the blue, unbidden, unsought. It's not that everything was going bad. Everything was going okay, but then boom! God happened. And they found they'd walked through the door into a new world. Which of course is the same world only different. Everything is where it was before, but it all means so much more now. The Sun shining, the rain falling, the smell of coffee or baked bread, the smile of a stranger, an unexpected kindness—it all now points to God, all has new meaning in Him.

This can create a problem, though, for those who haven't made that shift. You're both looking at the same sight or same event, only you see it entirely differently. It reminds me of the scene at the end of CS Lewis' "Chronicles of Narnia." The Jesus-figure Aslan takes Lucy, Edmund, Peter and everyone to the New Narnia, to what we would call "heaven" or the New Creation. It is a place of astonishing light and beauty; a place where every blade of grass seems to mean more, where every creature sings for the sheer joy of the Creator, where the sight of a common daisy is enough to take your breath away.

But then, in the midst of all this splendor, a group of dwarves are huddled together, convinced that they are sitting in the rank stench of a barn. Lucy is so upset that the dwarves are not enjoying the New Narnia that she begs Aslan to help them to see. Aslan replies, "Dearest Lucy, I will show you what I can do and what I cannot do." Aslan then shakes his golden mane and a sumptuous banquet instantly appears in front of the dwarves. Each dwarf is given a plate heaped with juicy meats, glistening vegetables, plump grains of rice. Each also receives a goblet brimming with the finest wine anyone could ever imagine.

But when the dwarves dive in and begin eating, they start gagging and complaining. "Doesn't this beat all," they lament. "Not only are we in this stinking stable but now we've got to eat hay and dried cow dung as well!" When they sip the wine, they sputter, "And look at this now! Dirty water out of a donkey's trough!" The dwarves, Aslan goes on to say, had chosen suspicion instead of trust and love. They were prisoners of their own minds. They could not accept Aslan's gift of the New Narnia for they would not see it. They are imprisoned in a hell of their own devising.

Fact is, for some people, nothing we say or do can change them, can convince them otherwise. But that says more about us, than it does about them. Because we don't have the power to convert anyone. God does it, God has to break into our world, break through our reality. We can't make that happen. At best we can try to make situations that will allow it to happen. But in the end, it is God's action alone. There's nothing we can do. It is God's work.

This is what Jesus was getting at when he says this morning that "the flesh," that is, natural human powers, "is useless" and that "no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father," by God. At the end of the day, the only thing we do on our own, apart from God, is sin. So everyone who comes to Jesus, who believes in him, who makes that conversion from one reality to God's reality, does so because God makes it happen, because they have been chosen, selected, predestined "from the beginning" by God, Jesus says. God foreordained it. So the answer to why

we aren't scandalized when Jesus tells us to eat his flesh, is....because *God*. We didn't do it, we didn't “decide to follow Jesus,” God chose us.

Now I need to be careful in saying that because God's choosing us, predestining us, doesn't make us better people, smarter, more moral, or more innately godly than others. For whatever reason, God had his purposes, and He wants us to be part of them. And even if we think we've been chosen, that doesn't mean that we will persevere. We may believe now but that doesn't close off the possibility of unbelief or faithlessness in the future. Judas seemed to have been chosen, was among those who didn't walk away here. Yet he goes on to betray Jesus, as Jesus himself notes.

Now, I realize that this topic, all this talk of being chosen and predestined, sounds to outsiders like ridiculousness, like pious rationalization, a religious version of the cliché, “everything happens for a reason.” That's what it sounds like from one reality, but from another perspective, from our reality, it is an earnest effort to make sense of why some don't see what we see. It's a ‘making sense’ within the reality, within the reality of an all-knowing, all-powerful and all loving God who wants all to come to him, to know him, to have life in him, and yet some resist, reject that love when it is offered. Because it wasn't what they were looking for, or it wasn't what they think they need, or because it doesn't come in the right packaging. And so they walk away, just as Jesus' followers walk away from him.

And we are seeing plenty of this today, one-time-believers walking away from Jesus, walking away from the church. Sociologists call it the “Great DeChurching.” And yet now, as then, some of us remain. Call it stubbornness, or willfulness, or even laziness. Maybe there's a little of each of those, if we're honest. But more than that, for most of you, I imagine, you stick around for the same reason Peter and the others stayed: because you've seen all the other options available, and seen how those ways end up. And so you can say with Peter, “Where *else* could we go? Jesus, you have the words of eternal life.”

Truth or cosmic joke? We're here because we believe (or suspect) it's the former, that it's true. But really, it's because God made that belief possible. This is the Lord's doing; and it is marvelous in our eyes. Thanks be to God!