

Disillusioned? Or Dis-Illusioned? – Judy Cox

Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18; Psalm 34:15-22; Ephesians 6:10-20; John 6:56-69

Disillusionment has hit him, badly; he's seen his mentor's feet of clay, finally and devastatingly. His expectations of God and God's people haven't matched his experience. And so he walks away from his shallow faith, which was rooted in his mentor; his own roots had not yet gone deep into Jesus Messiah. He's abandoned what he now calls illusion, rather than giving up his expectations, the illusion, to grasp a truer, deeper Reality. We all know and pray for him, under one name or another, and may feel that we have failed him. ... On the other hand, is dis-illusionment always failure?

After reprising the last three verses from last week's gospel text, we add eleven more for our final passage in this sixth chapter of the Gospel according to John. As John Massena shared last Sunday, all across this chapter, from the multiplied loaves, through Jesus' teaching as bread, to Jesus' own physical self as nourishment, eating has been a focus. Now we turn to those choosing not to eat. They're looking for King Jesus, and refuse this Jesus-as-main-course. This isn't what they signed up for, doesn't meet their expectations, not the familiar bread they want. Too edgy, too risky—too shameful!

We begin with Jesus' words, vs. 56: *Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood remain (or abide) in me, and I in them.* These words take on new depth today, where some deliberately do not abide. In their disillusionment, they will not remain.

Jesus, *sent by the living Father, lives through-and-because of the Father*; just so, whoever feeds on Jesus will live *through-and-because of Jesus*. They will share the very life of the Trinity! Boundless-forever-abundant life is extended to those who will partake. Those who insist on safer and more familiar bread will die.

Now we learn that Jesus is teaching in the synagogue in Capernaum. We can't tell when the scene changed from the seaside. (Has the author combined two situations for teaching purposes? Elsewhere in this gospel we find other such arrangements.)

Scandalized whispers fill the synagogue in response to Jesus' words. Earlier, up through verse 53 of this chapter, he and others used a polite, socially acceptable word for eating. It's often used scripturally as metaphor; for example, prophetic and apocalyptic literature speaks of "eating" a scroll from God. Those prophets digest inwardly what God has said, and incorporate it into their lives. We'd say "ingest," or, politely, "feed on."

But beginning in vs. 54, Jesus leans into a more vivid, offensive term meaning "gnaw" or "chomp on"—used of animals' eating. Far more literal, more earthy and physical, it's not metaphorical eating. Think "chow down"! He uses it repeatedly, and stresses its offense: *For my flesh is real food, and my blood is real drink.*

You got it—there's more! With a nod to the ever-offensive infomercial: Jesus will throw in double the scandal, double the offense and shame!

The Noahic and Mosaic covenants both forbid drinking blood, even to not eating the meat of animals whose blood hasn't been properly drained. Not because blood is dirty, but because it is holy! From Leviticus 17: *the life of the flesh is in the blood...as life, it is the blood that makes atonement.* The

Israelites were never to join or mimic the “magic” rituals of their pagan neighbors, who would try to steal the life force from an animal by drinking its blood. Life is God’s, and only God’s to give! Taboos against cannibalism and also these major Jewish taboos ricochet across this synagogue. The whispers escalate to murmurs. As John described last Sunday, this disturbs us listening today, and appalls Jesus’ first audience. It’s beyond shocking, to horrifically offensive. (About now we’re all wondering, Jesus, what ARE you thinking???)

In this context we glimpse the offense of the Incarnation to the Jews. Life is God’s, and only God’s to give. Only because Jesus IS Godself, the God who holds and IS life, can and does he give his **lifeblood**, pulling us into the divine life through his death. To those who don’t hold Jesus as God, this repulses and blasphemes!

We’ve been told that *the Jews* (or Jewish leaders, in John) had been murmuring, grumbling, criticizing Jesus—told in terms meant to recall the grumbling, critical generation of Israelites with Moses, who ended up dead in the wilderness. Now we hear about the reaction of *the disciples* (not the same as *The Twelve* here). Perhaps we expect better things from the disciples!

In a way, our Old Testament text has set us up. Joshua has reminded Israel of their corporate history of serving other gods, gods in and of other lands, beyond the Euphrates River and in Egypt. Now, in a culture that assumes that these deities have geographic limitations and that each land has its own unique gods, contenders for Israel’s worship also include *the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living*. Joshua challenges Israel to choose whom they will serve. All Israel responds, resoundingly, *Far be it from us that we should forsake the LORD to serve other gods. ... We also will serve the LORD*. You go, Joshua, way to lead and persuade those following you! Yay for God!

Surely these disciples in the synagogue, followers of this Yeshua, will prove faithful too! After all, they gathered up Jesus’ miraculous leftovers at the beginning of this chapter; they were rescued by him at sea. Surely their expectations are better grounded than those of *the Jews*. Perhaps we assume that *the disciples* belong with “us,” and not with “them.”

But here *many of his disciples* grumble—not just the Jews, or the hungry crowd, but also those following Jesus and putting themselves under his authority! We may write off “those guys” of the crowd, but the reference to *his disciples* hits us too close to home.

This Logos is difficult, those disciples object; *who can hear it?* Great question! It is THE question this Gospel puts to every reader. English translations may say *this teaching* or *this*, but since the beginning Prologue of John we in the audience have known that Jesus is the “Word/Logos” and that the “Word/Logos” became flesh.

Jesus, aware of their critical response, comes right out and asks: *Does this scandalize you? Does this offend you, make you stumble?* (Yah think!?)

The passage continues, doubling back on earlier themes. He responds: *What if you may behold the Son of Man ascending to where he was before?* Not just this last bit, about his flesh and blood, is coming under fire; it’s also the *coming down out of heaven* claim from earlier. Yes, this includes the scandal of the Incarnation itself, that Jesus is not only the bread of life (which could refer to his teaching), but the Word-with-God that became flesh.

Most of all, here in this gospel Jesus' *ascending* always evokes his manner of return to the Father, being *lifted up [on the cross]*, to *draw all* to Himself. It is on the cross, in the ultimate dishonor and shame of the cross, that Jesus is glorified, in John—there is no ascension scene here, like Luke's! This scandalous incarnation includes the voluntary, sacrificial, shameful death of Jesus—a divine Messiah who dies in public dishonor! Even to us who name him Lord and God, if we are honest, the way of the Cross seems horrific!

Jesus continues, with more hard-to-hear, how-do-we-interpret-this talk: *It is the Spirit who is the Life-giver; the flesh profits nothing. The teaching that I myself have spoken to you is spirit and life. But among you there are some who do not believe.* Yes, the teaching of Jesus is life-giving, part of the whole Triune package. But not everyone will choose to sign for that package, if you will.

Again we hear of the Father's role in our coming to Jesus: *No one can come to me unless it has been granted by the Father.* This is prevenient grace—positive, giving, drawing grace—grace given to come and choose.

But to our dismay we learn that many of Jesus' disciples choose not to remain; disillusioned, they step back, *turn back and no longer go about with him.* God's drawing, wooing love can be and is rejected. Later in John the soldiers in Gethsemane *step back* at his *I Am* reply to their question. Here, as there, Jesus' self-revelation does not prove irresistible.

Jesus' attitude doesn't seem uncaring or triumphant, but rather, sad. This gospel repeatedly reminds us that Jesus has no illusions about us humans—he is saddened, but not disillusioned! Turning to his inner circle, he asks, *You don't want to go away too, do you?* Although given, and drawn, by the Father, they are still asked to choose.

Simon Peter speaks for The Twelve. Echoing Jesus' own statement, he says, "*You have the words of eternal life—Lord, to whom [else] can we go?!?!*" The Twelve too, are being dis-illusioned, hearing, though they do not yet understand, that death awaits their master. Yet they respond differently than those other disillusioned ones, who turned away: *We ourselves have come to believe (trust), and have come to know (knowing through past personal encounter affecting their present—their roots are deep!).* THAT'S the kind of trusting and knowing that gives up illusions and expectations to remain, to abide.

What do they know? *That You Yourself, Jesus, are the Holy One of God. The Holy One of God!* This is not just a messianic title; it mirrors one of God's own names, The Holy One of Israel. ... No, The Twelve don't understand fully. But they've let go their expectations of Messiah for the reality of this One Who has encountered them, whom they have come to trust and know personally.

Is this dis-illusionment failure? At the end of the chapter, in verses we didn't read, only The Twelve remain, and one of those persistent ones will even betray Jesus. Divine choice includes Judas Iscariot, but not irresistibly. Though Jesus chooses The Twelve, his choice does not guarantee their choosing faithfulness. Yet God works life in the midst of disillusionment and rejection. Peter, who speaks here for the believing, persisting Twelve, later will deny Jesus...and be restored, in another of Jesus' seaside meals!

Was Jesus seeking to dis-illusion, to throw off balance and offend his audience(s)? Perhaps they, and we, need such dis-illusioning! Dietrich Bonhoeffer, speaking of Christian community, could too have been speaking directly to this text: *Only that fellowship which faces such disillusionment ... begins to be*

what it should be in God's sight, begins to grasp in faith the promise that is given to it. The sooner this shock of disillusionment comes ... the better ...

Today we confess our own inclination to turn and leave in disillusionment, clinging to our notions of King Jesus. The Gospel calls us from our false impression that blessed equates with easy. We shrink from that difficult call, from the way of the cross. When we read ourselves into this text honestly, we're too often *the disciples* who want to *turn back*. We dread the scandal, the pain and shame; we only reluctantly give up our illusions to follow Jesus. I find myself shrinking, most recently, in the struggle to acknowledge real opposition, here in Greenville, to our church's yard sign, and to meet unfriendly, antagonistic phone calls peaceably. Our Board means by it to show solidarity and support, wearing *the belt of truth* and the *shoes* from our Ephesians text *to proclaim the gospel of peace!* But some are taking offense—even other Christians. Perhaps you, too, are encountering such opposition, or other kinds, in your seeking to follow Jesus faithfully. Although this is hard, we trust, and we remain.

Let me close in prayer for all of us, with words we hear at Morning Prayer every Friday: “Almighty God, whose most dear Son went not up to joy but first he suffered pain, and entered not into glory before he was crucified: mercifully grant that we, walking in the way of the cross, may find it none other than Your way of life and peace; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord. Amen!”