

Tracy Daub
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Ephesians 6:10-20, **John 6:56-69**

DIFFICULT LESSONS

Cannibalism horrifies people nearly everywhere across the world. It is a practice with such deep cultural taboos that even people who have been forced to resort to cannibalism in dire circumstances--when the choice was between dying or eating their dead comrades--have usually refused to speak of it afterwards. To eat other human beings is horrifying and shameful.

Jesus' words must have been really shocking to his followers. Jesus says to his followers, "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them." Sounds an awful lot like cannibalism. These would have been terribly difficult words to accept for those early followers who lived by strict purity codes concerning what they ate. Eat flesh? Drink blood? It was offensive. So offensive that we are told that many of these disciples turned back from following Jesus. Never mind that Jesus intended his words to be metaphorical rather than literal. These followers couldn't accept what Jesus said to them. After hearing Jesus' words, they said, "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?" And so they left him. These weren't casual hangers-on, those who merely check the box "Christian" on forms but rarely darkened the door of a church. These were the elders and deacons and Sunday school teachers of their day. Imagine many of the pillars of the church just walking away and leaving.

Jesus never makes it easy for Christians to follow him. When we consider all the things Jesus taught and all the things he did, we can easily find ourselves echoing the disciples when they said, "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?" Which teaching of Jesus do you find hardest to accept? There are plenty to pick from. Maybe it's when he tells us to forgive seventy-

times seven. Think how hard it is to forgive someone *once!* Think about the person who has wronged you, hurt you, and how hard it is to forgive them. But now Jesus tells us to extend grace repeatedly. This teaching is difficult!

Or maybe the teaching we find hard to accept is when Jesus tells us to love our enemies. Who is that for you? We all have them--enemies. These are people we know, who we dislike, who have hurt us, wronged us. Enemies are also people we may not know personally but who we oppose or who oppose us: maybe people of another political party, or the folks in upper management at our company, or people at your insurance company who keep denying your claims, or enemies of our nation. Love your enemies, Jesus tells us. Care about their welfare. This teaching is difficult!

Maybe the teaching we find hard to accept is when Jesus warns us about it being easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven. He summons to us to reconsider our relationship with money. He warns us about storing up our treasures on earth and calls us to radical ways of sharing and giving our money to those in need. This teaching is difficult.

There is really no teaching more difficult than when Jesus tells his followers to love one another as he has loved us. Jesus is not speaking about a warm, sentimental emotion--what we think of when we think of love. He was speaking of a kind of steadfast commitment to others and their wellbeing. All those other teachings of Jesus we find so difficult to accept are really incorporated in his teaching to love because forgiving, and sharing, and reconciling, and working toward justice all are part of what it means to love. People underestimate how radical Jesus' teaching about love was. Sometimes people think that politics should be kept out of the church. But there is nothing more political than Jesus' teaching about love--because genuine love, Jesus'

kind of love shapes everything about our lives. It shapes who we love, how we love, how we spend and use our money, the way we vote, the issues and concerns we raise our voices about.

Love is always political. To love others as Jesus loved is political. But not loving as Jesus loved others also has political consequences. Selfishness and greed have political consequences. Apathy to injustice has real implications for others in society. Supporting the status quo of life when there is suffering has concrete implications for others. Caring about some people--say our own families or our own nation--while failing to care about the welfare of other people has real political consequences.

When the terrorist acts of 9/11 took place, my niece was very young and so her parents did their best to shield her from the scary news and images. But, like most children, she still found out about it. One day at the dinner table my four year old niece announced to her parents, "I know why those men did that bad thing with the airplanes." Her parents were surprised by this revelation but asked her why. She answered, "They forgot that God loves everybody, including them."

I have yet to hear a better explanation of 9/11 than this. Look at what happens when people forget that God loves everybody, and that God loves them. When you understand God's love as Jesus taught it, you could never carry out an act like 9/11. Love is always political. To love others as Jesus loves us is the most radical, political thing we can do. And that is why we can say: "this teaching is difficult."

Following Jesus is not expected to be easy. We come to church and sing our songs in our well-pressed clothes, in our cheerful sanctuary, but this is not what living as a follower of Christ is all about. The real Christian life occurs out there—beyond these doors, in our regular lives, when we are confronted with integrating Jesus into our lives, when we are challenged to forgive,

share, reconcile, speak out, rearrange our priorities, and to love. That is why Jesus tells his followers: "Eat me. Drink me." It is only by taking Jesus into ourselves, into our bodies, our hearts, our souls, our minds, that we can hope to live out his teachings and know the fullness of the life he intends for us.

We know that following Jesus in our regular lives is a struggle. The apostle Paul refers to it as a battle and calls us to put on the armor of God in order to face the onslaught of powers that would assault this way of life. We peace-loving folks don't typically like the militaristic sound of this passage from Ephesians. But Paul uses this imagery to underscore that there are forces both within us and from outside us that threaten our faithfulness to Christ. Our own fears and desires may threaten our faithfulness. Our greed, anger, hatreds, selfishness are powers we must contend with. And we get swept away by cultural forces—the lure of security in wealth and possessions, the spirit of vengeance, the demise of compassion in the face of societal fears, the casualty of truth and human rights when it seems expedient to forgo. There are forces that threaten us and our adherence to Christ's way. And so we are encouraged to gird ourselves for the battle because Paul acknowledges that following Christ is not easy.

But notice what we defend ourselves with. In order face the hostile forces within our own beings and within our world, we dress ourselves in truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation, and the Word of God. We put on these attributes of God as we get dressed so we can face the internal and external challenges of life.

It couldn't have been easy for Jesus to see some of his disciples just get up and walk away. So Jesus asks the twelve remaining disciples, "Do you also wish to go away?" And Peter responds, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life." There are indeed

many other alternatives in life to Jesus' way. There is the shopping mall way and the bank account way. There is the pursuit of personal pleasures and desires way. There is the way of revenge, the way of social status and prestige, the way of accomplishments and accolades. There is the tribal way of guarding those closest to you—be that the family or nation. There is way of dominance and intimidation and humiliation. But none of these alternatives offer eternal, abundant, meaningful life. It's a no brainer to Peter. However difficult, however challenging, the way of Jesus is the only one he could choose. And even when Peter fails to follow this way, even when he denies Christ and runs away in fear, even so, he comes back to the way of Jesus. For to whom else can he go? Christ is his choice.

During the time of apartheid in South Africa, the government canceled a political rally against apartheid. In response, Archbishop Desmond Tutu led a worship service in St. George's Cathedral. The walls of the cathedral were lined with soldiers and riot police, carrying guns and bayonets and holding recording devices to tape anything Tutu might say that could be held against him. Bishop Tutu began to speak of the evils of apartheid, how the authorities in power were doomed to fall. He pointed a finger at the police and said, "You may be powerful—very powerful—but you are not God. God cannot be mocked. You have already lost." The moment was filled with unbearable tension. But then the Bishop seemed to soften. Coming out from behind the pulpit, he flashed that radiant Tutu smile and began to bounce up and down with glee. "Therefore," said Tutu, "since you have already lost, we are inviting you to join the winning side." The crowd roared, the police melted away, and the people began to dance. *

There is only one winning side. However difficult the way of Jesus Christ may be, we are invited to join the winning way of love.

* *God's Politics*, Jim Wallis—recounted by John Ortberg, *The Christian Century*, August 9, 2003.