

# COVENANT WORD

## How Much Can You Stomach?

Psalm 111; Ephesians 5:15-20; John 6:51-68

A message by  
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Dear Friends,  
Thank you for wanting to read and study these thoughts more carefully. Please know that I do not take full credit for anything that may be contained within, because I may have read or heard something at some point during my pilgrimage and do not remember its source and thus, cannot give the rightful author his/her credit. I pray that you will find inspiration and encouragement.  
Sarah Shelton



WHERE FAITH COMES TO LIFE

When Lloyd and I married, I discovered that there were some Shelton table habits that were different from the Jacksons. For instance, on birthdays, the Sheltons celebrate with store-bought birthday cakes, while the Jacksons preferred homemade cakes. The Sheltons ate out for Sunday lunch; the Jacksons were around the family table. The Sheltons encouraged everyone to order exactly what you wanted to eat, because it was offensive to share food. Jacksons, however, were notorious for sharing from each other's plate.

So on a trip to South Carolina for sister Betty Lou's deacon ordination, Mary Helen, Lloyd and I stopped at Wendy's for a quick lunch. Lloyd asked what we wanted. We each gave our order. In all fairness, I tried to warn Mary Helen to truly order whatever she wanted, but her answer remained certain: "I just want a hamburger." And when Lloyd questioned her further she said confidently that she did not want any French fries, she did not want a drink, she did not want a frosty. I knew what was coming. She did not know the Shelton rules.

We sat down. Lloyd separated the order and about half-way through lunch, sure enough Mary Helen's fingers silently slipped across the table to select three French fries from Lloyd's super-sized container. His offense was immediately evident. "What are you doing?" he demanded as he deliberately moved his fries out of reach. She then casually unwrapped a spoon, took his frosty in hand, removed the lid and dug in. My otherwise kind and generous husband, got up from his seat with a huff of indignation. He returned to the line

to order more French fries and another frosty. He gave the French fries to Mary Helen and he kept the undefiled frosty for himself. Mary Helen was stunned that she had offended Lloyd. And me? I was just grateful that we had not had his fork sink into her hand from across the table!

We are in the sixth chapter of John again this week. The chapter is called the bread discourse, and it presents some graphic table habits. It has me wondering what God is trying to feed us. Is it delicious, wholesome, farm to table...full of flavor and satisfaction, shared freely? Or is it doled out, warmed over, tough, hard to chew, difficult to swallow with digestive distress soon to follow?

In this chapter, Jesus goes back and forth between the towns of Tiberias and Capernaum. In one he seeks rest. In the other, constant demands are made by the masses and criticism flows freely from the scribes and Pharisees. It is in the synagogue in Capernaum where a demon

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recognizes Jesus. Jesus calls disciples in Capernaum. Jesus heals Peter's mother-in-law, the official's son, and the centurion's slave all in Capernaum. On the hillside just outside of Capernaum, Jesus miraculously feeds the thousands. So it is in Capernaum where Jesus launches into this discourse about being the bread of life. The gist of His teaching is that while Jesus has provided physical bread for the multitudes, His bread is not like the manna that God provided in the wilderness. This heavenly bread that Jesus offers is quite literally Himself, His

very life; and those who eat it "will live forever."

Now this is familiar language for those of us who are accustomed to celebrating communion around a table with other believers.

But let me put it in a more literal interpretation that conveys the offensive words that the audience hears. Jesus is talking about His flesh, His actual skin and muscle tissue. He is offering it to be gnawed and chomped. So, a more literal translation might be: "Those who chomp my flesh and guzzle my blood have eternal life; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink." (Barbara Brown Taylor, "To Whom Can we Go?" *Home By Another Way*) As one who prefers her meat cooked well done, this turns my stomach. This descriptive language is so offensive, my appetite disappears. Add to this the fact that the Hebrew Scriptures forbade the drinking of blood, and we begin to understand why Jesus' followers shrink away. When his listeners hear these words, they begin to murmur. Their offense is so great, they begin to leave saying, "This teaching is difficult." Others say, "I find it hard to even listen."

Was it the final straw? Surely, they are not just now being offended! My offense began when Jesus said I should sell all my possessions and give the proceeds away to the poor! I got offended when Jesus took me from the head of the line and told me to wait my turn just like everyone else. I got offended when Jesus said let's replace your power with servant-hood, generosity, humility and sacrifice for the benefit

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of those who live on the ragged edge of nothing! I got offended when Jesus told us to love everybody. What's a little blood and flesh in comparison?" (Boyle)

Aware of their grumblings, Jesus bluntly asks, "Does this offend you?" It is almost as if Jesus cannot keep himself from speaking pent up words. He keeps going

when perhaps He should have stopped. He keeps pushing when His listeners have already closed their ears. He won't let up, because He has to know who will trust Him even when they do not agree with Him. He has to know who will hang tough even when He rubs up against everything they have ever been taught. He has to know who can handle the truth even when they are offended by it, because there are consequences if we follow Jesus.

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The gospel tells us that those upset are "disciples." The use of the word "disciples" and not "the crowds" or "the multitudes" is significant. These who draw back are not casual listeners. They are not the folks who show up only on Christmas Eve and Easter Day. These disciples have been teaching Sunday School, singing in the choir, making coffee for fellowship time, working in the nursery and turning in a pledge card. They are pillars of the church, so to speak, and when they start leaving, the remaining church leaders bring in consultants, hold town hall meetings and organize Open Table Forums to troubleshoot. (John Ortberg, "Roll Call," *Christian Century*, 8-9-03)

These disciples refuse to travel with Him any longer, because they are offended by His words and because the reality has dawned on them that they too will suffer and die. Perhaps they spat on the ground as they left or shook the dust from their feet or wagged their heads in disbelief. Some probably moved from the front seats to the back pew. Others moved their membership to another faith community where attending church rarely felt like being rubbed with sand paper.

So maybe the real miracle in the sixth chapter of John isn't that over 5,000 people are fed. Maybe the real miracle is that a dozen disciples faithfully remain! Jesus looks the remaining twelve over and asks, "Do you also wish to go away?" Do you wonder what Jesus sounded like when he asked this question? I wonder if there was an edge to his voice, a hint of anger like when your patience has run out. "Do you also wish to go away?" Or maybe it was asked sadly: with a sigh and sagging shoulders from the burden he feels. "Do you also wish to go away?" You see, I wonder because even pastors who are gifted with the strongest of egos, when they watch their people

leave...people with whom they have shared their soul, people in whom they have invested time and energy and prayers...to watch them leave is devastating. So much so that seeing those who remain, you wonder with slight paranoia: "Do you also wish to go away?"

Now truth be known, these disciples who remain will also "go away" when Jesus is hung on the cross, but at this point in the gospel narrative, we are a long way from Jerusalem, and the last supper and the cock's crow. In fact, we have gotten comfortable with Jesus' popularity among the people. Crowds, masses, multitudes come out in droves to search for Jesus. So what is happening here that there are disciples turning away? Was Jesus no longer their candidate of choice to bring reform? Had they lost confidence in his social safety net? Were the stakes simply too high and the payoff too far down the road? (Amy Allen, "Lord to Whom Shall We Go?" *The Politics of John 6*)

Apparently in their sacrificing and watching, waiting and wondering and worrying, they somehow become disenchanted. "What was it that attracted them to Jesus in the first place," they wonder. And so they leave. Can we blame them really? Are we so different? (David Lose, "Words of Eternal Life," *Day 1*, August 23, 2009) Aren't there times when we wonder if we have believed in vain? Perhaps it was in the dark of night as we watched and prayed beside the bed of a child or grandchild wondering why this child is so sick and if this child will ever recover. Maybe it's in the wee hours of the morning when you wake up alone and wonder why your spouse left and whether your spouse will ever return. Maybe it is at noon when you are standing in the line of the unemployment office wondering how you ended up there and worrying over if you will find another job. Or at dusk, while cooking supper, you think about your family and how you used to gather around the kitchen table. But now, ill-will has invaded and things haven't quite turned out like you planned. Oh, we are much too civilized to renounce the Lord openly. We are much too polite to desert the Lord completely. So maybe we just don't make the extra effort to get to church, or we reduce what we give, or we are more reluctant to tell the Nominating Committee "yes," or we simply stop praying. Is this any different from the disciples described in John? (Lose)

Now while Jesus is sometimes playful with His

stories, He never asks a frivolous question: "Do you also wish to go away?" It is a determining question about loyalty. It is the question that gets asked when a line is drawn in the sand, and we must determine if we are in or we are out. Will we follow Jesus in spite of being offended or will we blend into the crowds? Will we dedicate ourselves to the rigorous training to be on the team or will we walk away? Will we continue in the relationship or will we give it up? Will we be loyal to the company or will we put our resume in the hands of a head hunter? Will we uphold the conditions of this contract or will we find a loop hole? Will we be a supportive presence in this community of faith or will we shop around for another church home in which the offensive words of Jesus are either never spoken or they are so disguised in showmanship that they don't take hold.

When Jesus asks if they want to go away, He is giving these last remaining few their chance to escape with some dignity intact. He is reiterating the choice that is theirs to live in the truth by physically leaving or staying. He is reminding them that they will have to give up their need to always understand. He is letting them know that they might never fully agree or feel comfortable with everything He says or does. He is being sure they understand that they too will end up being offensive if they live as true disciples of His.

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You see, to love God and neighbor requires the disciples of Jesus to follow His offensive example by acting to bring change to established systems that support discrimination and inequity resulting in inadequate schools, housing and health care for those at the lowest spectrum of society. We will offend others when we ask for money to feed the hungry instead of building the military budget. We will offend others when we point out the inequities practiced under the name of justice and liberty for all. We will offend others when we point out indifference and lack of intention. We will offend others just because we are members of a church who makes honest attempts to love whoever comes through the doors. (John Boyle, "When God Offends Us," *Fourth Presbyterian*, 8-26-12)

I am close to giving up worry over who I will offend, for in honest moments of reflection, what causes me the most pain and anguish is how often I must offend God by being reluctant and silent. How my fear must be offensive to this One who suffered the gravest

offense by being crucified as a criminal to show me, and to show you, the extent of God's love for the world. I feel convicted to be honest enough to admit that I often hide behind my offense with God in order to cloud my awareness of who I am, and who I am not, and who I just might need to be if I am to follow Jesus Christ. (Boyle) So I listen carefully when Peter, awash with self-disclosing honesty, answers, "Where else can we go? Who else can we turn to?"

If Rick Bragg were answering these questions, he would reply with an answer about the South. He writes: (*My Southern Journey*)

People ask me, often, why I love a place so imperfect, where the mosquitoes dance between the lukewarm rain and the summer heat turns every stretch of blacktop into a shimmering river of hot tar; where the football-mad fling curses... and the politicians seem intent on a return to 1954. How do you not love a place...where on the Georgia-Alabama line there are mountain churches with hard-rock preachers in their Conway Twitty sideburns who fling scripture with the force of a flying horseshoe at congregations who all but levitate in the grasp of the Holy Ghost...I love tomato sandwiches and fried oyster po' boys and pineapple upside-down cake and biscuits and sausage gravy...I love lightning bugs.

This goes on and on for 14 pages, until Bragg says:

I have seen vast deserts and deep chasms and rolling seas and camel trains on a horizon...but [the south is] home. [And when I am home, I know that] I am an imperfect citizen of an imperfect, odd, beautiful, dysfunctional, delicious place.

This is how I feel about being a follower of this offensive Jesus. I am at home in the Kingdom of God even though I am that imperfect believer who experiences His Kingdom as the odd, beautiful, dysfunctional, delicious place where we feast on the bread of life with others who in spite of doubt, in spite of fear, in spite of rejection and in spite of judgement know that it's the only place we can belong because

the host feeds us with the bread of life. Where else could I go?

Bread of heaven...bread of heaven...feed me til I want no more. Feed me til I want no more. Amen.

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