

Experiencing the Comfort of God

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John 6:66-69

What makes you question God? What causes you to ask, as you were going through life, "What God is doing?"

We don't often talk of these times. We aren't comfortable talking about the things about God which have offended us. But I want us to bring these times to the surface this morning. I want us to consider the times when our relationship with God has been challenged or even threatened.

I want us to bring these to the surface so that, instead of sweeping them under the carpet and hoping they go away, we can bring them before Scripture and let God deal with them in our hearts.

You see, these situations are key times in our relationship with God. They are moments when we are called to make a decision. Will we end our journey with God or will we stay the course and go deeper with him?

Jesus said something that offended the disciples. Look at v. 60-61:

On hearing it, many of his disciples said, "This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it.?" "Aware that his disciples were grumbling about this, Jesus said, "Does this offend you?"

Now some of you are asking, what is the "this?" What is the it? Some of you have looked ahead...but don't! There is a point I want us to catch before we find out what had offended Jesus' disciples. I want us to keep working on what offends us.

Think about what things offend you about religion...what does a church do, or a pastor do, that offends you?

One more thing...what does God do that offends you? What has happened in the world that God should have handled differently? What has happened in your life that leaves questions of "why" in your heart? What has happened in your relationship with God which has made you wonder about the wisdom of following him?

There will be things which God does that offends you.

After all, Jesus said things that offended the disciples.

Okay, okay, now you can look. Look at verse 53 of chapter 6.

"Very truly I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you."

Why would this offend? Just because Jesus is using language more akin to Bram Stoker films than to the synagogue in which he was standing...

Well, Jesus didn't stop there. He continued:

"Whoever eats of my flesh and drinks of my blood has eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day. For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink."

We aren't the first generation to be offended by something God has done.

Listen to how Jesus' words offended people in Jesus' day:

vs. 52: "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?"

vs. 60: "This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?"

In the days of the early church it was this kind of language which made Christianity an offense to many Romans. Some called Christians cannibals.

When the Protestant church was breaking off from Roman Catholic church this language was a source of offense. It was central to a very big argument about the Lord's Supper. Is the bread and the cup used in communion literally the body and blood of Jesus? Or are they just symbols? Or are they spiritually the body and blood while materially being bread and drink?

The offense in Jesus' day not simply his "horror film" language. The offense was connected to the person of Jesus. Jesus, a man, was speaking as though he were God.

The Jews began to grumble, John tells us in verse 41, because Jesus said, "I am the bread that came down from heaven."

They were offended because Jesus was saying that he was God. His dramatic language only made this offense more acute.

But Jesus was trying to do something very different. He was working to move his followers into a deeper relationship with him.

As is often the case with Christianity, God is after something different than the institutional church.

verse 56:

Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven. Your ancestors ate manna and died, but whoever feeds on this bread will live forever.

Do you hear the language of relationship?

There is no doubt that Jesus is speaking of himself in terms normally reserved for God. But he is not doing this to promote himself. He is doing this in order to draw people into a deeper relationship with God through him.

By the time we get to this story in John's gospel, Jesus had a large following. Earlier in chapter 6, Jesus fed 5,000...that is 5,000 men. If you add the women and children that were following him the number would increase even more. And these people were serious. They had gone out into the wilderness without any food. This is why Jesus had to feed them with bread. And when Jesus and his disciples left by boat to go to another place, this crowd found boats and followed them.

They had a relationship with Jesus. And it was a relationship in which they follow him and he provides for their physical needs...abundance of bread,

healing from illness, other miracles and signs. They related to Jesus as someone who could meet their needs. They sought him out for that purpose.

The comfort of Jesus meeting our personal needs is just the beginning of a relationship with God. It must grow beyond this to an experience of a deeper comfort of God.

We want to keep the relationship at this first level. And when Jesus tries to shift it we take offense. But if we hold to God when we don't understand we make the shift he wants for us.

He wants us to move from a relationship where God exists to meet our needs to a relationship where we exist by loving, worshipping and serving God.

Just before our passage this budding relationship between Jesus and these thousands of people was challenged. Jesus used dramatic language to shift people into a deeper relationship with him. But the people were offended by what Jesus said. And most of these relationships would not survive.

vs. 66: From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him.

Now come some of the saddest words in the Bible.

"You do not want to leave too, do you?" (John 6:67)

Such sad words. We know this kind of experience. We know this kind of sadness. Every relationship comes upon just such a challenge sooner or later.

When I read these words I think of two different relationships I have been involved in. The first one was in my highschool and college years. I dated Jan for three years in high school; sophomore, junior and senior years. However, I was one year older than her so after my senior year I went to college and she continued in high school to finish her senior year. Our relationship became a long distance it was challenged in a way it had not been challenged before. And that question was before both of Jesus' was before both of us: "You do not want to leave too, do you?" That is, we needed to make a decision to continue the relationship or decide that this

challenge was more than the relationship could bear.

In this case, it was a challenge that the relationship would not survive. We left the relationship.

The second relationship I think of when I read these words of Jesus relates to my being a pastor who has seen many people come and go from church. "You do not want to leave too, do you?"

A couple of decades ago, the Presbyterian Church USA developed a study of the denomination to find out where the people who left our church were going. They thought it would be to other churches. But everyone was shocked to find out that the largest group leaving the Presbyterian church were not going to a different church. Instead, they simply weren't going to church at all.

Now I don't believe that a relationship with Jesus is the same thing as being part of the institutional church. But I also don't believe you can go deeply with Jesus without being committed to a group of his followers.

The problem is that such a community can disappoint us. They can hurt us. They can offend us. As a matter of fact, any gathering of people eventually will.

So, when I hear people who are hurt by the church they are attending are looking for a new church I feel sad. I can't help shaking the feeling that they are giving up on an opportunity to go deeper in their relationship with God. And when I hear that people who have been disappointed in the church are giving up on the idea of gathering with others to live out that Christian life I can't help but feel that they have given a negative answer to Jesus' question for them: "You do not want to leave too, do you?"

But in our passage, Simon Peter answers in the affirmative. And because of this response he will go deeper with God. He has entered the comfort of God.

"You do not want to leave too, do you?" Jesus asked the Twelve.

Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God."

Notice Peter's focus in his response. It isn't Jesus' ability to feed him that is his focus. It isn't his ability to heal or his miraculous powers. It is Jesus' teaching. It is what he says that is the focus.
"You have the words of eternal life."

As Peter continues his response we see that it isn't just Jesus' teaching or words that keeps Peter and the disciples with him. It is the actual person of Jesus...it is who Jesus is. "We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God."

Peter has moved from relating to Jesus according to what he can get from him to relating to Jesus for who he is. He is going deeper. He is moving into a deeper experience of the comfort of God.

Simon Peter has entered the comfort of God.

Cheryl and I been married for over 20 years. We have gone through numerous challenges in our relationship-getting used to marriage, moving and job seeking, children, changes in our own sense of self as we go through life. Each time the challenge before us was to pull back from the deepening relationship or to dive in. Each time we have decided to go deeper. And making it through the challenges of life has made our relationship more secure.

Each month I take a day to prayerfully examine my life and my ministry. This past Wednesday was my time this month. As I thought through my core beliefs one jumped out at me in a different way. I realized more deeply than before how my wife and my children are a blessing of comfort and joy to me.

Not that it is a perfect relationship. We still have areas of struggle and growth. But that is less important now. I am in this relationship less for what I can get out of it and more because of the person that Cheryl is. After more than 20 years I know who she is and I am thankful that she has been willing to be with me all these years.

Such a relationship is available for all of us. Jesus Christ is working in the events of our lives to bring us into such a relationship with him.

"What is your only comfort in life and in death?" So begins the Heidelberg Catechism.

In 1609 Dutch explorers brought the Heidelberg Catechism to Manhattan Island. Before there was a New York City, many of the settlers of New Amsterdam had memorized this catechism.

They taught the 129 questions and answers of the Heidelberg Catechism to their young people who were preparing for church membership. Many of their pastors would preach through it each year. It has been used by different groups in the United States since that time. It is in our Presbyterian "Book of Confessions" today.

And the first question is essential for each of us to answer in our hearts if we are going to go deeper with God.

"What is your only comfort in life and in death?"

If I could have one wish for our congregation, it would be that each of us would move from being in relationship with Christ for what he gives us to being in relationship with God for who he is.

It is a process we are all engaged in. This is what Jesus wants to teach us through the events of our everyday lives. And it is a process that takes time.

But this question and answer can insure that we learn the lesson. If we memorize it in our minds it will be there when we need it. In the good times it will be a source of worship. In the tough times it will be a source of strength. Eventually, what we have memorized in our minds will be written on our hearts. And we will know the comfort that God has for us.

Take some time this week to memorize this question and answer.

Q. What is your only comfort, in life and in death?

A. That I belong - body and soul, in life and in death - not to myself, but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ, who at the cost of his own blood has fully paid for all my sins and has completely freed me from the dominion of the devil; that he protects me so well that without the will of my Father in

heaven not a hair can fall from my head; indeed, that everything must fit his purpose for my salvation. Therefore, by his Holy Spirit, he also assures me of eternal life, and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him."

Amen