

Sermon – John 6:56-69
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“On the Offensive”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name of God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. In today's climate of blame and denial, it's hard to remember that famous people sort of used to apologize for things. But it's true! Part of the art of the apology, however, was to make sure that an actual apology was avoided. You know, a non-apology apology. A fauxpology, if you will. For example: random movie star is found to have tweeted offensively in the past, so random movie star makes a big show of apologizing for their sins. Except, when the time comes, they don't actually apologize. They say something like, "I'm sorry if you were offended by such and such." See what they did there? They apologized, but not for what they had done. They apologized on your behalf for being too sensitive to their comments! But the box would be checked off, we'd all pretend penance had been done, and we'd move on. Sorry you were offended! Try not to be so sensitive next time, right?
2. One almost expects Jesus to make such a move today at the end of the sixth chapter of John's Gospel. He has just spouted some pretty offensive stuff; you know, if you don't eat my flesh, if you don't drink my blood, you won't have life. What? As Pr. Lauren pointed out last week, such statements from Jesus led to charges of cannibalism against the early church. Jesus has just said some offensive things. If he had an ounce of public relations-sense about him, he'd apologize. Or blame and deny. Soften the message. *Something*. But instead of apologizing for being offensive, Jesus doubles down and goes on the offensive. Oh, you're bothered by the fact that you have to eat my flesh,

drink my blood? Just wait until what I tell you next, that the Son of Man must ascend. In John's Gospel, the meaning of this is clear. Jesus has to be lifted up; he will give his life – spend his flesh and blood – not in any glorious way, but upon a cross, broken and bled out for the sake of the world. You want to see the living God? You want to find life? Then eat and drink of the God who dies, who is crucified, for you.

3. Jesus tells us to look to the cross. And this is the hardest teaching, isn't it? The most difficult thing for us to hear. That which is not so much difficult to apprehend intellectually as it is almost impossible to accept in our guts. Yes, it's hard, weird even, to speak of eating and drinking Jesus, of believing he's really present in bread and wine. Yes, our post-Enlightenment brains struggle with the veracity of the virgin birth or the reality of a bodily resurrection. **It's all so hard to believe, but that's not what's so hard about belief.** What's hard about belief, about *faith-ing*, is coming to terms with the fact that we are dead, that there's no use pretending otherwise, and that the only way out is for the Word of Life to die for us so that we might be raised with him. And again, it's not that this is so difficult to believe intellectually, theologically; it's that it's darn near impossible to convince us that this is where we are. Not slightly disappointing; not a little bit broken; not ill. No, we're *dead*. And if we have a chance at finding life, it's going to be through Jesus – his body and blood, his life lifted up and poured out for your sake. That's what we need. It's what Jesus has to offer and – crazy as it sounds – it's the only offer on the table. And it's on offer on this table today.

4. Still, anyone among his disciples that day with any sense in their heads left Jesus behind. Anyone with anywhere better to be – well, that's where they went. Back to their boats, their shops, their children, their cares and concerns. Back to pretending that they were fine. Because they didn't, we don't, like to acknowledge the truth. But that doesn't change what the truth is. It happened again yesterday. Death, that is. It came for John McCain, one of

the great Americans of this age. Last year, reflecting on his diagnosis, Senator McCain said simply and with clarity, “Every life has to end, one way or another.” Senator McCain earned the right to speak with familiarity about death, and he could see the future clearly enough. And God bless his family as they mourn and celebrate. Most of us, however, most of the time, stuff that truth – the great truth of our broken mortality – down for as long as we can. But when we ignore the truth of death, we miss out on the joy of following the One who has conquered death, the One who is even now giving out life to anyone willing to grab hold.

5. By the end of today’s text, the crowd around Jesus has become a small group. For the first time in John’s Gospel, they are called the Twelve. The ones with nowhere else to be. Don’t they want to go, Jesus asks? Peter responds, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life?” If you’re like me, you’ll hear those words like this (sing gospel acclamation tune). Lovely, right? Lovely and true. But we can hear these words another way, too; not as well-composed song but as guttural confession. It’s not hard, for those of you who can remember the film, to see Jesus and Peter as Sgt. Foley and Zack Mayo from the film, *An Officer and a Gentleman*. Sgt. Foley, portrayed by Louis Gossett, Jr., is trying to get Richard Gere’s Zack Mayo to drop out of OCS. Mayo protests, asserting his desire to fly jets, to succeed, to be his best. But pushed to the brink, he breaks down and screams, “I got nowhere else to go!” And then, quietly, “I got nothing.” The story turns on this moment, as does the story of faith. The beginning of faith, you see, Peter sees, is in acknowledging our emptiness, our hunger, our mortality, our need. And then, in that moment, seeing that Christ has been lifted up on the cross to feed our deepest hunger, quench our deepest thirst. We come forward – again, today – and offer what we have to God: empty hands. And we find the very Creator of the universe placed into our hands, our mouths, our lives. And we are full. Filled, we are alive. Forever alive, and that doesn’t mean it starts after we die. It means that fed by Jesus, we live today; we live the life that is really life. The

cross, which at first offends, ends up being the most beautiful sight to behold, as Christ goes on the offensive against all which would keep us from God.

6. And so here we are today, we who have been made alive in Christ. We have much to celebrate. Alive today, we celebrate the 100th birthday of our friend, Paul Bouman. Like many of you, I re-watched an interview with Paul conducted by Pastor Costello from a few years ago. In the hour-long interview, Paul shares a great deal of wisdom, but the thing he said that struck me the most was, speaking of worship, "I don't want to miss a Sunday." Mr. Bouman, you're about 5,200 Sundays in. The fact that you still don't want to miss a Sunday gets right to St. Peter's point, to the guttural cry of faith becoming the joyful song of faith that sees in Jesus the promise of life – full, free life – both forever and right now. Who would want to miss out on such a thing? Mr. Bouman, thank you for helping us sing this faith with excellence and joy throughout these years. So today, together, we stare down death. We laugh, and we sing, for Jesus was dead and now he lives. What a thing! It's a hard teaching if you want to look at a thing that way, but I prefer to see a great, divine, cosmic lark. We were hungry, empty, dead. So Jesus gave everything, flesh and blood. For us. To us. To you. Lord, where else would we want to be? And since you've got nowhere else to go, let's stick around for a picnic. There's bingo and burgers, I'll be in the dunk tank, and the Holy One of God is hosting the whole shebang, the same Holy Christ who gives himself to you at the Eucharistic feast. What a thing. Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.