

Sermon Preached by The Rev. John S. Nieman  
St. Margaret's Episcopal Church  
August 22, 2021 Pentecost 13/Proper 16/Year B  
Texts – 1 Kings 8: 22-30, 41-43; Psalm 84; Ephesians 6: 10-20; John 6: 56-69

If we were one of those churches that had a big flashing neon sign out front -- you know, the kind that publishes the title of Sunday's upcoming sermon -- that sign might read, "This Sunday: Messiah Meets Miss Manners."

Some of you have probably heard of Miss Manners. Her real name is Judith Martin, and for many years she's written a syndicated column that responds to questions about proper etiquette sent in by readers concerned about the social graces. People ask advice on every conceivable situation, from the proper way to turn down an invitation to be a bridesmaid at the wedding of the cousin you've despised from childhood, to the proper way to eat a whole lobster at a formal dinner party. Miss Manners' words carry divine authority in the etiquette world.

So imagine the following fictional correspondence:

Dear Miss Manners: Melvin and I were horrified at what happened at synagogue last week. A dirty young man with long hair had been bringing a few of his friends to Shabbat services during the previous few weeks. They had been very well behaved, sitting appropriately in the back, quietly minding to themselves. But last week, right after Rabbi Goldberg had read from the Torah, the young man had the nerve to walk right up front and tell all of us that we had to eat his flesh and drink his blood. We were horrified! Mr. Cohen had an angina attack. Mrs. Fleischman almost passed out. Rabbi Goldberg did his best to quiet the young man down, but without success; he went on and on with his grotesque speech. Martin and I felt we had no choice but to get up and walk out. Most of the assembly followed right on our heels. Were we right to leave in the middle of the service? Signed, an offended religious observer.

Dear Offended One: Miss Manners cannot condone your actions. There is no question that the young man crossed a boundary of propriety when he interrupted the service as he did. His words, indeed, suggest a twisted mind, and would have upset even the most vulgar among us. So your feelings are completely justified. It is never appropriate, however, to lead a march out of a religious service before it is over, unless, of course, you become ill or have good reason to believe there is an imminent, physical danger. Good etiquette notwithstanding, Miss Manners finds it often to be the case that the speech that offends our sensibilities the most is precisely the speech that we need to hear the most. Signed, Miss Manners.

The gospel passage we heard just a moment ago finally draws to a close John's expansive reflection on the story of the feeding of the 5000. As I said several weeks ago, John uses this story to shed light on who Jesus is. Jesus is the bread of life, the living bread that came down from heaven. And Jesus' words have been getting increasingly off-putting not only to the super religious within the crowd, but also now even to the casual observer. "The bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life." And he says these things not in casual conversation around the evening campfire, but in the synagogue, the place of worship. Many are deeply offended, and rightly so. For his words touch on the heart of the purity laws against eating meat with blood. And, of course, for the overly literal-minded, they sound cannibalistic. The charge of cannibalism was in fact sometimes levied by the Romans as part of their justification for persecuting the early Christians. It's not unlike the way some people in our own day attribute all kinds of

grotesque and dirty and criminal behaviors to whole groups of foreigners, ethnic groups, and people with different skin colors in order to incite fear and division and racial animosity. Those people - they gather every week to eat the flesh and drink the blood of their Messiah, they said. Disgusting. "Because of this," the text says, "many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him." Jesus had crossed a line. And even many his own followers could no longer abide his presence. So they walked out. They were done.

Peter and some others hang in there, though. Do you want to leave, too, Peter? Jesus asks. Now is your chance. "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."

Think about how risky those words of conviction are. Everyone around you is saying, I've had enough. This guy's out of his mind. It was ok at first. Back then we could take him out in polite company. But now every time he opens his mouth he offends us. And you're standing there saying, "Yes, but, there's something in what he's saying that we need to hear. I don't fully understand it, but I know that my life is fuller and more abundant when I am with him." And as all your friends walk away from Jesus, they're walking away from you, too. The temptation to get up and leave is great, especially when the words you hear pierce like a dart through what is most sacred to you.

What is most offensive to you about Jesus? What is it that pushes you to the line where you say, this is just too much? Is it his penchant for hanging out with sketchy characters? Is it his call to us to love the very people we've been taught to hate? Is it that he sometimes gets really angry? How could our lovely, calm, meek and mild Jesus flip over tables at the Temple while brandishing a whip? Is it that he came to give abundant life not only to those in our club, but also to the whole world, including the people who don't like us?

Maybe it's not Jesus who bothers you so much. Maybe it's the Church, and the people in it. Perhaps you've seen the bumper sticker that says, "Lord, save me from your followers." I laughed the first time I saw that. Then I remembered, I'm one of them. Is it that the Church is full of hypocrites? "I don't want anything to do with them. I'll go where there are no hypocrites." Well, good luck with that one. Is it those strange and out of date hymns that push you to the edge? Perhaps it's the strange, newer songs of praise in the green book? Is it the way some people just don't know how to dress properly in church anymore? Is it the decisions you don't agree with that the Church has made on controversial issues? Is it that church leaders have the nerve to speak out in the public square against injustice and lies? Is it theological statements that offend your intellect? Is it that we are sometimes called to yield up what is most dear to us for the sake of the Body of Christ?

What is most offensive to you about Jesus? What is most offensive to you about the faith we share? Whatever it is might be a clue about where you need to pay most attention. The offense might very well be what's needed to drive you to a greater depth of relationship with God. As our etiquette expert said, "Miss Manners finds it often to be the case that the speech that offends our sensibilities the most is precisely the speech that we need to hear the most." And just so there is no misunderstanding, Miss Manners is not talking about the speech of known demagogues whose goal is to deceive. Peter gave us the criterion to call out false equivalencies: "Lord, you have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."