

People love to find scandalous verses in the Bible. It's true. They love to find stories that are bloody or graphic or downright raunchy. Of course, they look for them for different reasons.

A few years ago, CPH published a pair of youth studies entitled “Not So Nice Bible Stories.” One was about “Master Criminals” of the Bible. The other about “Gory Deaths” of the Bible. Their goal was to generate some interest among teenagers who might view the Bible as a very dull book. Which, if you read these stories, you'll find out it definitely is not.

Of course, there are also those looking for scandalous verses in the Bible for a very different reason: to discredit it. To prove that it is misogynistic or racist or hateful. They look for things that offend them or others, pull those events out of context, and then say, “This is all the Bible is. It's awful. Don't read it.”

The funny thing is that we have quite possibly the most scandalous, offensive passage in the entire Bible in our readings today. No, it doesn't contain anything misogynistic, racist, or hateful. No, it isn't about a master criminal or a gory death. No, it isn't particularly graphic or raunchy.

No, it's a statement that we, as Lutherans, might take for granted. But which is, in truth, deeply scandalous and offensive, both to unbelievers and, even, to some believers. Can you guess what it is? *“Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life.”*

This passage is at the end of a much longer section of John's Gospel, beginning with the feeding of the five thousand. And I don't think we appreciate just how big a miracle that was. Five thousand men, plus women and children. Upwards of ten thousand people total. That is a lot of people. That is an entire stadium of people.

Yes, Jesus had done a lot of miracles before, but nothing of this scale and nothing quite this public. It draws a lot of attention to him. Word gets out. Pretty soon crowds of people are chasing him around the Sea of Galilee. Hoping to see another miracle. Hoping to have their bellies filled. Hoping to get in on the ground floor of this amazing prophet who can do such signs and wonders.

So they come to Him and insist that he do more miracles for them. Give them more food. Show them more power. But Jesus refuses. He tells them that they are chasing after food that will leave them hungry again. They desire only worldly power and glory.

They want manna in the desert, like Moses gave them. But what they should be seeking is the true bread from heaven. They should be seeking Jesus.

Because he is not just a worker of miracles. He is the miracle. He is God come to earth. He is the Son of God sent from the Father. He is the bread of life through whom they will never be hungry again. Through whom they will live forever. And the bread that he will give for the life of the world is his flesh.

Which is where we enter the story this morning. With a group of very confused Jews disputing among themselves, saying, *“How can this man give us his flesh to eat?”*

It sounded just ridiculous at first. I mean, can any of you just rip off a finger and hand it to another person for them to eat? Have any of you ever carved off a chunk of your thigh and fed it to your family? Of course not. It's absurd.

And yet, Jesus is insistent. *“Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him.”*

Four explicit references in row: eat my flesh, drink my blood. And the Jews who are arguing with him begin to realize... he's not kidding. He really means what he says.

And they're appalled by it. It's the most offensive, scandalous, repulsive thing they've ever heard. He's talking about cannibalism! The Gentiles don't even engage in such morally repugnant acts. And they're just supposed to sit here and accept this?

Well, that's the question, isn't it? And it's a much bigger question than just deciding how to receive Jesus' teaching in this one moment. And it's directed to a much bigger audience than just that crowd of people begging Jesus for breakfast that morning.

It's a question for everyone who calls himself a disciple of Jesus Christ. When Jesus tells you to do something that doesn't make sense, what do you do? When the Bible tells you to view the world in a way that is completely counter to everything our culture says, what do you do? When God's Word seems so obsolete that is regarded as misogynistic, racist, or hateful, what do you do?

Because Jesus can be pretty offensive at times. And the Bible can be pretty scandalous in its stories. And God's Word can be graphic and raunchy and downright bloody at times. And we, as Christians, need to know what we're going to do with that.

And so this question is posed to Jesus' disciples in our text this morning. And at that moment, they immediately divide into two groups. On one side are the twelve. Jesus' inner circle. His first and closest disciples.

And on the other side are the rest of his disciples. You see, Jesus did have other disciples besides the twelve. We know, for example, that there were at least seventy-two who called themselves disciples and were sent out by Jesus into the villages of Galilee to preach and cast out demons.

And it's these peripheral disciples who struggle with what Jesus has just told them. "This is a hard saying; who can listen to it," they grumble to each other. And so Jesus confronts them. And he asks them an important question.

"You take offense at this now. But what if, right now, at this moment, you were to see me ascend into heaven. What if I proved to you without a doubt that I am God made flesh. Would that change anything?"

Of course it would! But it shouldn't. Because that's what he's been asking them to believe all along. From day one, he has proclaimed himself to be the Son of God, come to earth to speak words of spirit and life to them. If they believe that, then they should accept anything he tells them. Even eating his flesh and drinking his blood for eternal life.

But they don't believe. They call themselves his disciples, but in the end, they're no different than that crowd, begging for more bread. Begging him to do miracles that satisfy the needs of their flesh. Begging him to display worldly power and glory. And so they turn back. They walk away.

It's then that Jesus turns to the Twelve. And he asks them, "*Do you want to go away as well?*" And Simon Peter – brave Simon Peter – stands up and, for once, he does not put his foot in his mouth. He says to Jesus exactly what we just said before our Gospel reading: "*Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.*"

Lord, if you want us to eat your flesh and drink your blood, then that's what we'll do. We don't understand how. We don't understand why. But we'll do it. Because you are the Holy One of God. Your Word is God's Word. And we don't need to watch you ascend into heaven to know that whatever you are saying means eternal life for us.

Of course, Jesus didn't command them to pull out a knife and fork right at that moment. He had something different in mind. But I have absolutely no doubt that when his disciples reclined at the last supper and heard him say, "Take and eat, this is my body given for you... Take and drink, this is my blood shed for the forgiveness of your sins," they knew what that meant.

They knew that in eating that bread together, drinking that wine together, remembering Jesus' words to them together, they were feeding on his flesh and drinking of his blood. They were receiving from him eternal life and the promise that he would resurrect them on the last day. They were doing something scandalous and offensive and something that could potential drive people away from their fellowship.

But it didn't matter. Because where else could they go? Where else could we go? Only Jesus has the words of eternal life for us. This we believe. Amen.