

“Scandabilism”  
Based on John 6:56-69  
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Let’s have some fun tonight with words, shall we? Jesus did, after all. This sixth chapter of John we have reading through the last few weeks is an extended play on words, with Jesus taking familiar words and ideas and playing with them in ways that confused and angered the general public and alienated even his own followers. This series of passages began with that miracle of sharing that turned five loaves and two fish into enough and more than enough, and continued in a dialogue between Jesus and those who were both hungry and impressed with what they had seen from him. And so Jesus plays with the word “bread” and calls himself the “bread of life” given by God which “endures for eternal life,” in contrast to the bread which was given to Moses and his people so long ago, the manna, a bread which indeed provided a certain form of salvation to those wandering in the desert but which did not ultimately prevent them from dying.

This of course angered more than a few people since Moses was still at this point revered for leading his people out of slavery and for making sure they made it to the promised land, a land now occupied by foreign invaders. Not content to leave well enough alone, when they start quizzing Jesus on this, he takes his play on words one step further and says, “the bread that I will give for the life of the

world is my flesh,” and that “unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.”

And so here we have the proverbial straw that broke the camel’s back, for to suggest a relationship between drinking blood and having life would be supremely offensive to Jews, and to suggest cannibalism would be offensive to nearly everyone. You will recall that the ancient Israelite understanding of blood was that it was the life force of a being, and that drinking it was therefore prohibited. Its use was limited to such things as temple offerings, not consumed like a common beverage. These folks didn’t eat so much as a rare steak much less contemplate a practice associated with, for them, far less “civilized” cultures. And of course, it went without saying that eating human flesh was taboo. And so we find Jesus playing with words like eating, bread, flesh, and eternal life, confusing and angering the very people to whom he had come to minister. And not surprisingly, more than a few decided they’d had enough, that there was too much to risk by associating themselves with this jester, that they’d take their chances sticking with the old ways where they’d never be asked to drink blood and practice cannibalism, that plain old mutton would do them just fine, with the proper condiments, thank you very much.

But a few stayed, a few who were represented ably by Peter, who in the words of one commentator “...speaks up for the whole group and answers a question with a question: who else can we go to? It is unlikely that the apostles

understood Jesus' words any more than those who chose to leave but they discerned that there was a deeper truth in them than they could yet perceive. They accepted that their lack of understanding did not mean that the words were wrong - rather, they accepted that they would have to grow into their meaning." Let me say that last part again: "They accepted that their lack of understanding did not mean that the words were wrong - rather, they accepted that they would have to grow into their meaning."

Now, there are more definitions of faith circulating in Christendom than one could count in a lifetime, but I think this is one of the best, the idea that to believe, we don't have to have a full understanding of God, but only a willingness to work on getting one. It goes without saying that no human being save Jesus has ever or will ever grasp fully all that God is, but that truth has not stopped many from not following Christ for the lack of their own complete comprehension. It has been often lamented that whereas science and the scientific method have given us many great gifts over the last few hundred years, they have also cultivated in us a reluctance to believe anything we cannot fully describe or quantify. While this is true in part, we need look no further than this passage to see that the shortcomings of the human imagination as a stumbling block to experiencing God is not a modern phenomenon. Those who left were saying, in essence, "I don't understand, therefore you don't exist." But those who stayed were saying, in essence, "Even though I don't understand, I know you exist and that is good enough for now."

I am of the firm belief that the church may be one of the last places on the planet where one can have one's attention span lengthened, rather than shortened, and one's vocabulary built, rather than destroyed. My generation, the MTV generation, is responsible not only for the infamous sound bite politics, in which an office-seeking candidate is reduced to what will fit into a programable segment of news media, but we are also responsible for shortening the human, or at least North American, attention span to a mere fraction of what it used to be. People these days are not so much smarter than in days of old that they grasp more quickly the idea under discussion. Rather, it is that they have so much less patience and consequently quickly turn to the next source of media consumption when they become bored with something that they feel has gone on too long. Perhaps you are experiencing that sensation right now! After all, I've been speaking for what is quickly approaching the average North American attention span. Our current practice of intellectual channel surfing has changed the way we think. We are now more knowledgeable than ever about a very wide range of issues, but that knowledge is also shallower than ever. We are intellectual jacks of all trades and masters of none. We know enough to engage in a conversation about almost anything, but not enough to sustain that conversation for very long. We have lost the capacity articulated by Peter and those who stayed to grow into meanings we at first do not fully grasp.

And so let me do my part tonight to strengthen your vocabulary and stretch your attention span, in the name of Jesus Christ. I'd like to introduce you to some new words, some real and some made up especially for this occasion. I have enlisted the aid of the technological wonders of our age, the infamous Power Point Presentation, to aid us in our understanding of what Christ is seeking from those who would follow him, those who would eat his flesh and drink his blood, as we play around with a few words the way Jesus did.

In this story, we see the beginning of the criticism of the early church as cannibalistic. As you know, cannibalism is the practice of humans eating other humans. In the language of the discipline of anthropology, the technical term for cannibalism is "anthropophagy," a compound word from Greek roots of "anthropos" meaning human, and "phagein" meaning to eat. Recent sociologists have come up with the term "ethnophagy," to describe the devouring of one culture by another, "ethno" meaning "a people" and "-phagy" again meaning to eat. No less famous a person than Elvis Presley regularly practiced ethnophagy, when he and other white musicians reshaped African American musical sounds, rhythms, and traditions and called them rock and roll. Elvis consumed the culture of Black music and made it white. Now, my hunch is that those who objected to Jesus' claim to be the "bread of Heaven," a bread which offered eternal life Moses' bread could not, that those same people were as much offended by the prospect of ethnophagy as anthropophagy; Not only did cannibalism seem barbaric, but they likely feared that

their culture would disappear, that it would be gobbled up by these new ideas, that they would be replaced. The Romans had taken their land and Jesus had already devoured Moses; was their religious way of life next?

Lest you think I have foisted the word “-phagy” on you as though it were Greek, you will conveniently find it in this Sixth chapter of John. It is the verb Jesus uses early in the chapter when he speaks of eating the bread of life. It is a more gentle word used to describe the process of consuming food. Interestingly, however, in the passage we are looking at tonight, a different Greek verb is used when Jesus says, “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me and I in them.” Here, Jesus uses the verb “trogein,” a word used to describe the way animals eat, a sort of cram-as-much-in-your-mouth-as-you-can sort of eating, what I used to call in eighth grade, “mowing down.” Imagine hogs being slopped on a farm. I believe this is also the root of the Spanish word “tragar,” one primary definition of which is “comer vorazmente,” to eat voraciously. Now, perhaps the author of John simply substituted one verb for another for a little variation, to make for a more linguistically interesting read, but more likely, Jesus is yet again playing with words and ratcheting up the tension by adding insult to injury where consuming flesh is concerned. Bad enough that he suggests such barbarism, but then to commend it in so vulgar a method? It is no wonder some were offended.

Which brings us to our next word, “offense,” in Greek, “skandalon.” Skandalon literally means “stumbling block,” something you trip over. It is used

more famously and poetically by the Apostle Paul when he writes “we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.” We have retained some of this idea in the English word “scandal.” A scandal trips up a politician. A scandal trips up our daily lives as we give attention to it. A scandal trips up a church seeking to faithfully follow Christ’s call. Jesus recognizes that what he saying about eating his body is bound to trip people up, but then he goes still farther: If you think this is a scandalous idea, he says, “Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? It is the Spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and life.” And all of a sudden, Jesus twists the language again, though surely most missed the point. They were too busy getting wound up over the idea of “the Son of Man ascending” to hear “the words I have spoken to you are spirit and life.” And “because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him.” These were tripped up by a teaching they could not have patience to grow into. Indeed, had they just listened to the whole of Jesus discourse, instead of the soundbite, they would have heard that Jesus followers are not called to anthrophagy, to cannibalism, but to "scandabilism," to mowing down on the skandalon, to eating and drinking the words of the Word of God made flesh, but born of the Spirit.

Scandabalism is not a real word. It’s a word I made up to describe what I think Jesus is calling us to do. It sounded a little more fun than “scandalophagy,”

which sounded too much like consuming the latest media frenzy and which was too polite for Jesus use of the word for chowing down. Let me here you say it together: “Scandalism.” Good, I knew you could. The definition of this new word is as follows:

Scandalism - n. The practice of consuming copious quantities of the living word of God to the end that one grows to be a stumbling block to any injustice or denial of hope.

As you can see from this definition, scandalism does not mean watching CNN 24-7 for the latest celebrity divorce, political mistep, or heaven forbid, child kidnapping. We are a society obsessed by scandal, but alas, the wrong scandal. Instead of celebrating failure and abuse of power and evil, we should be celebrating victories for human rights and miraculous healings and recovery from addiction and intimate relationships with God and we should be creating the right kind of scandals, the right kind of stumbling blocks.

You see, even though Jesus was in this passage a stumbling block to belief for some, those who chose to stay, who chose to grow into the meaning of words they could not understand, in turn became stumbling blocks themselves, not to faith, but to anti-faith, to suffering, to anything which would deny the abundant life Jesus offers just a few chapters later in the Gospel of John. When God transforms the scandal of the cross by raising Jesus from the dead, the cross becomes a stumbling block to death itself, in all the forms it takes moment by moment, hour by hour, day by dragging day, in a thousand small uncaring ways. When we carry

that cross, we place that cross in the way of all hate and suffering this world, transforming them as Christ has transformed each of us.

Friends, we are what we eat, both physically and spiritually. May we all practice a hearty scandalism, eating well and fully of the skandalon, Jesus Christ, the Word of God, that we may become ever more scandalous, bringing life and hope wherever we may be. But let us eat patiently, knowing that the feast at our Lord's table gets richer and richer, and more and more nutritious, with each course. Amen.