

THE LIFE OF CHRIST FOR YOU  
John 6:24-35

Jesus of Nazareth would have easily understood the meaning of Harry Truman's words: "If you can't stand the heat, stay out of the kitchen." Jesus endured the kitchen and took heat at every turn. There is hardly a story in the Gospels that does not have an undercurrent of conflict. In fact, often the conflict boils to the surface and dominates the story. The Gospel of John warns us at the beginning to buckle up, because it promises to be a bumpy ride. The prologue tells us, "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." Even though it tried again and again.

So Jesus finds himself embroiled in controversy from day one. And that should not surprise us. Again the prologue alerts us with these poignant words, "He came to his own and his own people did not accept him." Few understood him and few followed him. Most ignored him or opposed him. His was a life of constant opposition and conflict.

Consider the sixth chapter of John. During the Passover season a large crowd gathered about Jesus at the Sea of Galilee. They had seen his miracles and they were intrigued. Then Jesus performs a momentous sign by feeding this multitude from five barley loaves and two fish. In the Synoptic Gospels the feeding of the multitude ends with Jesus dismissing the crowds.

In John's Gospel, the people try to take Jesus by force to make him their king. Jesus has to hide from the crowd to avoid such an unwelcome coronation. Later Jesus will accuse the crowd of missing the point of his sign. According to Jesus, after eating their fill of the loaves they wanted a king who would perpetually feed them. Their bellies were filled but their hearts remained clueless.

In truth, Jesus challenges the very people he had just fed. He engages them in a dialogue about the meaning of this sign. Later in this chapter, the people begin to complain about what Jesus is saying. They ask a remarkable question reminding us that familiarity breeds contempt: "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know?" When Jesus delves more deeply into the meaning of this sign, some of his own followers begin to complain and say, "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?" Then Jesus confronted them with this question: "Does this offend you?" At that

point the Gospel says, “Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him.”

No doubt troubled, Jesus turns to the Twelve, his inner circle, and asks them, “Do you also wish to go away?” What a question! Jesus faces a full-scale mutiny, total abandonment by his followers. Thankfully Peter answers with these remarkable words, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.” But the chapter ends on a foreboding note. Jesus knows that one of the Twelve, Judas, will eventually go away with all the others. So that conflict with outsiders comes home to roast among the original Twelve.

Conflict without and conflict within. He came into his own and his own received him not. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness tries without ceasing to extinguish the light. Trouble and turmoil and difficulties. That was Jesus’ life in a nutshell. A life that ended in an unjust crucifixion for One who claimed to be “the bread of life.” Jesus offered the “bread of God come down from heaven which gives life to the world.” And for his troubles he was executed like a common criminal.

It is one of the greatest ironies of history that the One who came to seek and save the lost found himself opposed and rejected. Jesus reached out his hands and said, “Whoever comes to me will never be hungry and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” How can such an offer be refused? It really does boggle the mind when you reflect upon the life that Jesus lived. So much to give, so much to offer, so willingly, so graciously, so lovingly....and yet, so few takers! The older I get, the more amazed I am at the story of Jesus, a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief.

To this day, the life of Christ is still offered to us. Willingly, graciously, lovingly. The life of Christ laid down for us, given over for our redemption. The life of Christ broken and poured out for us. That is the promise of this Table of reconciliation. The bread broken. The cup poured. The life of Christ given for you. That is what we come to celebrate today. Grace upon grace. For you.

And yet this offer is still controversial. It is still hard to comprehend. The bread of life broken for you? The cup of salvation poured out for you? “Food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you.” What are we to make of all this?

Even to this day this table represents the single most divisive symbol in all the Christian church. Outsiders still find it repugnant and turn away, as though it were a pagan feast. And inside the church universal, nothing is more disputed than this meal given to make us one in Christ. Still our questions divide us: What does it mean? Who can administer it? Who can

receive it? What it does for us or to us? Oh my, the controversy surrounding this table reminds us of that meal by the seaside during the Passover season. John 6 narrates how the feeding of a multitude results in an extended argument. And that argument, my brothers and sisters, continues to this day. And may God have mercy.

I suppose it could be said we never get away from controversy. Whether it is health care or taxes or war or race, the back and forth of disagreement continues unabated. Within the church universal, the struggle to find oneness in Christ eludes us. So many of our arguments swirl around the Table of the Lord. And there are endless disputes about leadership and personalities that plague every congregation. Not to mention all the difficulties that divide virtually every family under heaven. In living our life, Jesus experienced all of our conflicts. He is no stranger to pain and anguish caused by controversy.

Recently in another city I visited with a mother in conflict with their grown daughter. It is a poignant dispute about the daughter's fiancée. It's a familiar story. How many times do parents have reservations about their daughter's choice of a husband?

The issue was the young man's emotional maturity and even his mental health. The daughter refused to see this as an issue. The parents begged their daughter to postpone the marriage, to see if some of his issues could be addressed. Counseling, medication, mediation—all these were suggested. To no avail. The daughter was resolute. The parents were disconsolate, deeply concerned about the daughter they loved dearly. Many tears on both sides have been shed. Many.

So what do parents do in such a situation? How do they handle a dispute that will so deeply impact their daughter's life and their own? The parents sought out pastoral support. They prayed earnestly. They wrote their daughter letters and emails. Impasse. The daughter was absolutely determined to marry this young man whom she loved. I saw the pictures of the engagement party. There were smiles and hugs. All for the camera. Behind the scenes there were pleas and tears. All for naught.

So this couple has decided that they will love their daughter and support her, even if they profoundly disagree with her decision. They will come to the wedding and be dutiful parents, even if their hearts are breaking. And they will hope for the best.

Sort of like the father of the prodigal son who let this determined young man take his part of the inheritance and go off into a far country. There was grace at the beginning of this parable, the grace to let his child exercise his freedom. And there was grace at the end when the young man

came limping home with those words, “I am no longer worthy to be called your son.” Not a word of “I told you so”, just grace that leads us safely home.

Jesus extends that same grace to us every time we come to this table. Even if we don’t understand what it all means, still he engages us and extends this offer, “Here is food that endures for eternal life.” Even when we reject Jesus a thousand times, still he gives us the “bread of God come down from heaven.” Despite our hardness of hearts, still Jesus reaches out to us with these gracious words, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry and whoever believes in me will never thirst.”

Friends in Christ, wherever you are in your journey of faith, you are invited home, to this welcoming Table of grace. Here is the life of Christ for you.