

**United Church of Fayetteville
310 E. Genesee Street
Fayetteville, NY 13066**

**Rev. Dr. Linda D. Even
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SPEED BUMP (John 6:56-69 portions)

In a former church, we had a midweek program for elementary age students that ran from October through early spring, finishing up a few weeks before Easter. It was the tradition that the third graders ended their year with a Seder and that I be asked to come and preside. We would tell the story of the first Passover and then have a Seder meal, explaining each element. I dreaded it. How in the world could I explain a god who ordered first children killed and rituals that involved smearing doorways with blood to eight year olds? (I assure you the story is just as gruesome in Children's Bibles as in adults'.) So, on the appointed day, we took turns reading the story. I took a deep breath and asked for questions. Hands shot into the air. Year after year, whether I called on the little girl whose hair bows matched her socks or the little boy voted most likely to lead a mutiny, their gag reflex already in motion, the question was always the same. "Do we have to eat the green stuff?" Apparently, parsley is a speed bump in the faith life of a third grader.

I remembered those occasions, as I studied this morning's text for today's sermon. Even in a culture and a time when animal (not human) sacrifices were common, the suggestion that Jesus' followers would eat his flesh and blood horrified them. We are removed from that culture. We are also provided the lens of the Last Supper (a meal not reported in the gospel of John, by the way), and are used to consuming Welch's and a round loaf branded with the Wegman's W, so the powerful imagery of Jesus' announcement is blunted for us. But as the text has it: "When many of his disciples heard it, they said, 'This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?'" Speed bump.

I totally get it. I admit, personally, to glossing over the literalism of what we mean when we say "This is my body. This is my blood." on a communion Sunday. On the other hand, I want to ask these disciples "What do you mean? 'This teaching is difficult and hard to accept!' Where have you been for the last 4000 years or even the last six months? Have you been listening? 'This teaching is difficult and hard to accept!?' What about...?"

"What about God liking Abel's offerings better than Cain's for no good reason?"

"What about God sending Abraham up a mountain with his son and a knife?"

"What about that whole Passover thing?"

"What about establishing a king who kills a man simply so he can take his wife?"

"What about a God who relies on fallible greedy humans to establish justice for the poor and relies on them not to use their power to take advantage instead of God just making it the world the way it should be?"

"What about a loving merciful God who allows the innocent to die along with the guilty?"

"What about what Jesus has said and done in the few months you've been with him? He knows people to whom he has never been introduced. He turns water into wine

at a wedding (apparently just for the good of the party). Along with the tables, he throws over a thousand years of tradition in the Temple and claims he could build the whole thing himself in three days. He tells people they have to be born again after already growing old. He offends age-old propriety by spending time with women and Samaritans. He speaks almost incomprehensibly about light and dark, flesh and spirit, heaven and earth in aphorisms that will take millennia to unpack. He heals people with a word, including people he has never met, because it suits his own purposes and he lays open claim to bearing the authority of God on earth. He feeds 5000 men women and children with five loaves and two fishes, has a voice that commands nature --- all that in just the first five chapters of the Gospel of John -- we haven't even gotten to the crucifixion and the resurrection yet! All that and it's just now getting hard for you guys?! Have you been paying attention?"

Have we?

As a newly minted weekly preacher instead of a monthly one, I am splashing around in Scripture more and more, encountering questions and difficulties I hadn't before. I actually thought preaching the lectionary this summer would be easier than preaching a sermon series on request. But, wherever I go, wherever we go in Scripture, we encounter things that are hard to swallow (pun intended) -- speed bumps in the life of faith.

Scripture often raises more questions than it answers; it presents us with a God, a Christ, a Spirit with whom we are not always comfortable; or it paints a world that doesn't fit our image of the way things should be. If it's not Scripture, it's life that challenges us with some grief or hope, some tragedy or joy, the bad getting good things or the good getting bad, that calls into question for us the truth of Scripture and the justice, mercy, and power of God -- or at least makes it hard for us to hold them all together. Again and again, we say "This teaching is difficult." Or at least we should be, if we are paying attention.

Because life with God and faith in Christ are not sustained in the church of easy answers; in the passive acceptance of something read or heard; in minds or communities that refuse to engage questions, wrestle with tough issues; or refuse to tolerate diversity of thought and theology. If we are paying attention, not only to Scripture, but to our own and our communal lives of faith, day after day, we will also see that one person's speed bump is the anchor and wings of another's hope. The truth is also that none of us can predict where our own speed bumps will be until we find ourselves airborne, stomachs dropping, from hitting them unexpectedly and a little too fast.

For me, quite frankly, the entire gospel of John, while extraordinarily and poetically written, is one big speed bump of faith. I experience John's interpretation of Jesus' ministry and teaching as one of a club with a secret decoder ring of faith, of Jesus as one who didn't particularly care if the people he came to heal and save were actually healed or saved, and who answered questions in the most abstract manner available to him. Two chapters into John and I am looking for the parable of the sower or the transfiguration or something else equally easy to sort out. This is a hard teaching for me to accept.

"Does this offend me?" Yes, actually it does. However -- and this is an important "however" -- that offense does not give me the liberty of dropping the book out of the canon or refusing to deal with it, or not staying in conversation with those for

whom it is a favorite (I'll undoubtedly be able to tell you who those folk are by then end of fellowship this morning:-)

Nor, and this is equally important, does my taking offense automatically place me beyond the pale of the gathered community of Christ. We'll notice that in the gospel this morning, Jesus does not send away any who are offended. His comments seem to suggest there might be more difficult teachings to come; that not everyone has been given the gift of faith by God, or at least that element of faith which includes a willingness to stick around when everything is not clear and an ability to accept at least some things one finds offensive as part and parcel of a much richer whole. Jesus notes that some of his followers have already left and he really wouldn't be surprised if more did.

Then he says to Simon Peter and me and you, "What about you? Will you go away too?" Jesus didn't ask them whether they were offended or not. He asked them if they were staying or going? That's the question: Are you staying or not? With each day, they (and we) understand more and more that staying with him means following him, listening to his teachings, studying, finding a way to deal with the difficult lessons that don't immediately become clear, and being among people who, undoubtedly who have trouble accepting things you or I find easy, or the things we find hard, they find easy. Staying with Jesus means staying in the messy human community he has and continues to draw to himself.

Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom can we go? ... We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."

To whom can we go indeed? There are a lot of "whats" out there. The Sunday paper (at least until they are all on-line), meditation practices, extra work, sports and exercise, public service – good things all, but very few if any are organized around a person. There are a lot of "whats" out there. There are not a lot of "whoms"

To whom can we go? We are ever and always drawn to the loving heart of a person who wishes to be in relationship with us and us with one another; who teaches with great wisdom and exercises even greater forbearance as we struggle to understand; who encourages us as we clasp hands in a community, that in Jesus' model, rejects no one because of what they find offensive, but rather offers hospitality as long as they choose to remain.

On the days when their teachings are easy and on the days when they are hard, let us trust that in ways we shall never understand, Jesus is moving us all together toward the one by whom we were created, in whose image we were made, in whose being we find our lives and with whom we shall have unity once again. To whom can we go? To the one in whom we have found the words of eternal life, the life of this community and the Spirit of God's praise. May it be so for us this day and always. Amen.