

A young deaf man I had worked with for a while in our church in Phoenix, asked a friend of mine— also from the same church-- who was a certified sign language interpreter, to take him once through the Eucharist service at the church before he decided whether or not to attend.

It was important for him to do this because for those who are born deaf and sign—English is not their first language.

So she slowly walked him through the service, and he loved it. He loved it until she read the words:

*“This is my body, given for you. This is my blood of the new Covenant. Drink it...”*

He looked at her with horror in his eyes. “That’s cannibalism!” he signed.

“No, no—it’s a metaphor,” she started. But he was out the door.

She couldn’t ever get him back in the church.

People deaf from birth can be very literal if they are not readers. And, as I mentioned, when they read—it’s always in a second, and not as familiar, language. And ASL isn’t a language of metaphor, but of the concrete: what is seen and experienced.

So I’ll ask you: do we literally have to eat flesh and drink blood in the Eucharist?

People have-- literally—killed each other over this question.

And they have missed Jesus’ point.

This is the problem Jesus had with his hearers this morning. When he says, *“the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh”*—they become unglued.

*“The Jews then dispute among themselves, saying, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?””* And when it says they disputed among themselves—it doesn’t mean they had a calm rational discussion.

But then Jesus continued to speak and it got worse: *“Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.”*

The followers became irate, and many left the Jesus movement.

Many people today are horrified by this passage. Even though they know Jesus is completely speaking in metaphor—it’s sometimes hard to deal with. Now—I’ll ask you again. Do you think of this passage as literal? That we literally have to eat flesh and drink blood?

I would say that probably few of us think this. The Articles of Religion of the Episcopal Church—which is in your Book of Common Prayer, states that this belief, called transubstantiation, cannot be proved by Holy writ, is repugnant and gives rise to superstitions.

But many throughout the ages have pointed to this story in John, and say it must be either true or false. This kind of Dualistic, either/or thinking, led to the doctrine of transubstantiation—the teaching that the elements of communion LITERALLY turn into Christ’s body and blood, not that they represent a memory and metaphor of his sacrifice for all people.

Dualistic thinking can help us to broadly categorize things in life, but even either/ or thinkers realize that there are some times when that just doesn’t work.

When it comes to understanding the really important things in life, like infinity, God, suffering, death, and love—dualistic thinking just won’t help us for very long—because either/or thinking is too limited.

To be able to understand complex realities we need more complex understanding. We need to get out of the either/or box, and jump into the world of both/and.

I was first introduced to this concept in Seminary. Many truths can only be grasped in the world of “both/and”. This is the world of Paradox.

Thomas Merton, a Franciscan monk and theologian tells us of a “hidden wholeness” that is the underlying unity of all things.

He says it better than I do—so I’ll quote him here:

*“Logic assumes that whatever violates the rules of rationality cannot possibly be true. Spirituality assumes that the deeper our questions go, the less useful [rational] rules become. The spiritual life—whose territory is non-rational, not “irrational”, proceeds with a trembling confidence that God’s truth is too large for the simplicity of either-or. It can be understood only by the complexity of both/and.. we appreciate paradox, not by abandoning our critical faculties, but by sharpening them.”*

Wow. We need a trembling confidence that God’s truth is too large for the simplicity of either-or.

Maybe it would be helpful to share what we learn in Seminary. And if it’s not helpful – feel free to disregard it!

First: what does the text say? Being able to get as close to the original language helps us understand how English sometimes can’t do justice to the original.

Second: Language is important. Sometimes they wrote in euphemisms that aren’t clear to us now, 2000 years later. Sometimes words meant something then that they don’t mean now. The meaning of the text is important. Our language is always evolving.

Third: you know how realtors always say location, location, location—well, in the bible it’s context, context, context. Who were the writers writing to? What was going on the world then? What events changed their worldview and how?

Even now, reading modern literature, it’s helpful to know whether something was written before the atom bomb was dropped or after. Because that was something that affected our world view.

Or was something written before most childhood diseases were eradicated--or after? Was something written before the internet came into being—or after? I can’t tell you how many times I’ve been reading a novel and thought

“Why don’t they just call for help on their cellphone?” only to realize that the writing predates cell phones. Context is important.

It’s a complicated way to read the bible isn’t it?

But it is a way that allows the Spirit to participate: to help us understand the meaning behind the writing. It allows the Spirit to pull back the curtain of either/or and reveal the world of both/and.

“Maybe then our spiritual life will proceed with the *“trembling confidence that God’s truth is too large for the simplicity of either-or.”* And we will understand that biblical truth--Jesus’ truth-- can be understood not by *“abandoning our critical faculties, but by sharpening them.”*

Amen.