

“That Offends Me”

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Text: John 6:56-69

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There was an article in Monday's *Kansas City Star* that dealt with the Unicorn Theater in Kansas City which is presenting the play "The Pillowman." The play depicts and describes some harrowing scenes of violence. The theater's website advises viewers that the show contains violence and strong language and is not recommended for children or "those who are easily offended." Are you easily offended? What offends you? What insults you or is an affront to your sense of propriety or decency? Are you offended by what you see? Something on stage or at the movies or on the television? Perhaps it's someone's attitude that you find offensive – when you know someone is of a particular mindset which you believe is morally wrong. It may be a behavior: the way someone drives, the way someone dresses, or how they treat others.

Do you remember the international furor created last February when a Danish newspaper printed a political cartoon which depicted the Islamic prophet Muhammad wearing a turban that resembled a suicide bomb? Many Muslims around the world were offended, claiming that Islam had been insulted.

For many of us, it's language that can be offensive, and words which can get us into trouble. Just ask Andrew Young, or Mel Gibson, or any other public figure who has uttered comments which have been seen as offensive. The issue of offensive language and how to avoid it is complicated by the fact that a community may disagree within itself as to what language is acceptable and what is not. Many seemingly inoffensive terms develop negative connotations over time and become dated or go out of style as awareness changes. A "within the group" rule often applies, which allows a member of a group to use terms freely that would be considered offensive if used by a non-member group; that's true of the African American community, the gay community, and other groups as well. According to Randomhouse.com:

What is considered acceptable shifts constantly as people become more aware of language and its power. The rapid changes of the last few decades have left many people puzzled and afraid of unintentionally insulting someone. At the same time, these changes have angered others, who decry what they see as extremes of "political correctness" in rules and locutions that alter language to the point of obscuring, even destroying, its meaning. The abandonment of traditional usages has also upset many people. But while it is true that some of the more extreme attempts to avoid offending language have resulted in ludicrous obfuscation (is "animal companion" necessary as a replacement for "pet"?), it is also true that heightened sensitivity in language is a statement of respect.

Jesus was not above offending people with His words. That's precisely what we see Jesus doing in our text from John. We're still with the 5,000 – that's Jesus' congregation, if you will – the folk whom he miraculously fed with a few loaves and fish. As we're already discovered, many of the crowd saw Jesus as their meal ticket, and wanted to make him king. No doubt the atmosphere was electric – a sweet moment of triumph and popularity that Jesus could savor and enjoy. But he's not seduced by the adulation and ambition around Him. He looks at the adoring faces of the crowd and sees people who want to use Him, not serve Him. So He describes the Kingdom of God to them again, but this time He uses the most offensive imagery he can think of to do it.

"You seek bread for your bodies," He says in effect – "but if you eat your fill of bread for the body, you shall die. I offer you bread for the soul – I am the bread of life. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life." Now even though He is clearly speaking in spiritual, not in physical terms, even though He's speaking figuratively about people putting His presence and spirit within them – the image of eating His flesh and drinking His blood is nonetheless repulsive. Even more than that, it's sacrilegious to Jewish listeners whose strict laws against eating any meat with the blood still in it reflect their reverence to God. If Jesus wanted to turn a crowd of followers against Him, He couldn't have chosen a more effective image with which to do it.

Suddenly the mood of the crowd turns ugly. People cry out. This teaching is difficult, who can accept it? The New English Bible puts it this way: "This is more than we can stomach." The crowd that earlier loved and lauded Jesus now wants to change churches and find a preacher whose more to their liking. Then the key verse, verse 66: "Because of this, many of his followers turned back and no longer went about with him." The message of that one verse is devastating – it is a blatant and bold rejection of Jesus. And the number of the verse itself – the 66th verse of the 6th chapter – John 6:66 brings to the minds of some the mark of the Beast 666 – from the book of Revelation. 666 has been called "Satan Six Pack." I would not be at all surprised if that crowd who walked away from Jesus were muttering 666 excuses. Excuses can be divided and destructive.

- Most failures are expert at making excuses.
- You can catch some people without money, without tobacco, but never without an excuse.
- There aren't really enough crutches in the world for all the lame excuses.
- An excuse is usually a thin skin of falsehood stretched tightly over a bald-faced lie.
- The most unprofitable item ever manufactured is an excuse.
- The man who really wants to do something finds a way; the other man finds an excuse.
- If you need some kind of an excuse, see your preacher; he has heard more than anybody else.

I suspect Jesus overheard some excuses from the people: "I'm not ready," "I'm not qualified," "I'm too busy." They were like us. We use excuses to explain or justify why we didn't do something we were supposed to do, why we did do something we weren't supposed to do, why we won't do something someone wants us to do, and why we are going to do something that we're not supposed to do. Excuses help us hide from responsibility. Excuses help us hide from the truth.

What if we in the church had zero tolerance for excuses – not for failure or mistakes – but zero tolerance for excuses? What would that mean for the church? It might provide us with those opportunities for study and devotion that so many of us say we want, but who just don't seem to find the time. Instead of walking away from Jesus, if we walked with Him, that might result in increased financial giving. If we quit saying what the followers of Jesus said, "This is more than we can stomach," we might invite others to worship instead of manufacturing reasons not to. Doing away with excuses might even fill our sanctuary. Zero tolerance for excuses might even result in bolder sermons – no longer would I be tempted to soften the Gospel message because of the excuse that I'm concerned about how people in the pews will react. Why do we sometimes make excuses when confronted with Jesus?

Sometimes it's out of laziness, but other times it's because we are offended and turned off by what Jesus says. And we should be offended. If we've never been turned off or challenged or offended by Jesus' words or deeds, we're probably missing the point. If I've never offended you speaking in Jesus' name, if I've never stepped on your toes, if I've never stepped on my own toes, then I'm not doing my job. If you've never reacted to a preacher's sermons about Jesus by thinking, "This is more than I can stomach," then you've never heard the gospel preached.

When Jesus offends us, it's because Jesus is presenting to us the mind, the word and the will of God, and if we are offended it's because our own ways – our prejudices, our frame of reference – matter more to us than the way of God. If we're offended like that Galilean crowd, it's because we come to Jesus seeking what we may gain from Him and not what we may give.

That's why the question our Lord asks at the end of the text is so critical. Most of the crowd has left Him, deciding that He is more than they can stomach; only the twelve remain and Jesus says to them, "Do you also wish to go away?" Peter answers for the twelve, and hopefully for us, as well, "Lord, to whom can we go?"

In our spiritual lives we tend to see Jesus in certain ways, generally in ways which are pleasant and pleasing to us. We see the Jesus who loves us, the Jesus who heals us, the Jesus who shepherds us, the Jesus who forgives us, the Jesus who redeems us. All that is fine so far as it goes – for Jesus does all of this and more for us. But if our experience of Christ is to be intimate, faithful and true, we will also go out of our way to seek the Jesus who offends us. Real spiritual growth comes when we are challenged and not simply comforted by Christ, for that is when we know we are accepting Christ on His terms, and not merely on our own.

He tells us to see things from a new perspective – to start living by God’s point of view, which He is showing us in the flesh. He tells us He is the way, the truth, and the life and if we want to truly live (as opposed to merely exist) we must give up our lives for Him. We must feed on the Bread of Life. We must stop making excuses. Zero tolerance for excuses would no doubt empower more of us to say with conviction and integrity. Jesus Christ is Lord of my life. Jesus Christ is Lord of my life. Jesus Christ is Lord of my life. Jesus Christ is Lord of my life. Jesus Christ is Lord of my life.

O God, make us healthy, well-rounded Christians. We want to be the kind of disciples who will stay with Jesus even when the rest of the world finds His difficult words too much to bear. When He turns and asks if we want to leave Him as well, we want to say, “No Lord, we have nowhere else to go.” Help us make it so, in the name of Jesus. Amen.

(Thanks to Erskine White for the use of his imagery.)