

Centre Congregational Church, U.C.C.
Sunday, 26 August 2018

“Digesting Metaphors”

Christian Scripture: John 6:56-69

A document written in the late 2nd century A.D. entitled “The Octavius of Minicius Felix” describes a debate between a Christian and a pagan at the Roman port of Ostia.¹ In this debate, Christians are accused of being cannibals. During the early centuries of the faith, many suspected that Christians ate flesh and drank blood. Such misunderstandings occur when much of the scriptures are interpreted too literally.

One of my favourite and one of my daughter’s least favourite conversations is this one:

Madeline: “I am *literally* starving.”

Dad: “f that is the case, then you should phone Child Protective Services. Actually, what you mean is that you’re *figuratively* starving.”

Madeline: (Rolls eyes.)

¹ Christianity.com, “Why Early Christians Were Despised”, 28 April 2010.
See: <https://www.christianity.com/church/church-history/timeline/1-300/why-early-christians-were-despised-11629610.html>

Or, here is another conversation:

Madeline: "...And when I heard the news, it literally crushed me."

Dad: "It *literally* crushed you?"

Madeline: Yes. (sarcastically) It literally crushed me. Every bone in my body was shattered. I had to undergo sever surgery and physical therapy."

Dad: "Yeah, I'm sure."

Madeline: "What?! You don't believe me? You're killing me. You're *literally* killing me."

Have you ever seen the episode of "The Big Bang Theory", when this similar exchange happens between Penny's dumb boyfriend and Sheldon Cooper?



Dumb Boyfriend: "I haven't been to a comic store in, literally, a million years."

Sheldon Cooper: *Literally? Literally*, in a million years?

I once read a book entitled, *The Year of Living Biblically: One Man's Humble Quest to Follow the Bible as Literally as Possible*.²



The premise of the book is that the author, A.J. Jacobs, strove to *literally* follow all the rules in the Bible. In the book, the Jacobs cites Leviticus 15:20 that states, “You should not lie on a bed where a menstruating woman has lain, and you can’t sit on a chair where she has sat”. Well, Jacobs’ wife was not at all thrilled with this commandment. Therefore, to make things difficult on her husband she purposely sat in every chair in the house. Jacobs had to only stand for days in his home! You will have to read about the episode when he attempts to stone a person for adultery.

The point of all this is that the Bible cannot and should not be taken *too* literally. For some reason, this is a controversial theological position for many of my fellow Christians of the more

² A.J. Jacobs, *The Year of Living Biblically: One Man's Humble Request to Follow the Bible as Literally as Possible*, (Simon & Schuster; reprint edition Paperback), 2008.

conservative, or fundamentalist, ilk. It should not be controversial to interpret the Bible in a very non-literal, or symbolic, way.



In fact, theologians such as John Shelby Spong argue that many if not all of our most cherished biblical narratives should *not* be understood literally.³



Theologians, such as, one of my favourites, Rudolf Bultman, have argued this for decades, if not centuries.⁴

It is amazing so many of us have not learned the lesson of not taking the Bible *too* literally. It is amazing because Jesus so

³ John Shelby Spong, *A New Christianity for a New World: Why Traditional Faith Is Dying and How a New Faith Is Being Born*, 2002 and *Eternal Life: A New Vision: Beyond Religion, Beyond Theism, Beyond Heaven and Hell*, 2009.

⁴ Rudolf Bultman, *Myth & Christianity: An Inquiry into the Possibility of Religion without Myth*, translation 1958, (Noonday Press, Prometheus Books), 2005.

obviously taught that the ways of the past are sometimes obsolete (for example, no longer are we to seek 'an eye for an eye'). It is also amazing because Jesus so often taught us that the Old Covenant has been superseded by the New and he spoke in symbolic terms, non-literally. Yet, today, often, we as people of faith still do that which the Pharisees did. For example, we want to condemn homosexuality or we want to interpret the Bible too literally.

In our scripture reading this morning which Lise read, we can see that Jesus' interlocutors could only interpret Jesus' teachings literally. Jesus declared that he was the 'bread from heaven'. Jesus stated that whoever believes in him shall have eternal life. Then, those who heard argued amongst themselves. They said, "How can this man give us flesh to eat?" Jesus was un-phased. He continued with the metaphor: "Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me [...]. This is not the bread that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever" (John 6:57-58).

Now, let's take this from the top. One, 'Father' is a metaphor for 'God'. It does not mean that God has genitalia and therefore it does not mean that God is male. Two, Jesus is not talking about

actual 'flesh'. Three, Jesus is not even, literally, talking about 'bread'. You see, here we have metaphor on top of metaphor. Four, Jesus is not talking about literally drinking 'blood'. Five, it is arguable that even "rising on the last day" is to be interpreted non-literally. 'Living forever' can even be interpreted metaphorically.

You see, when interpreting the scriptures literally, that is, when we digest the Bible *too* literally, we become confused. And to load metaphor on top of metaphor, we often develop indigestion. And if I go one step further, when we interpret the Bible *too* literally, the only thing we risk coming out of our mouths is diarrhea - and that is the polite word.

History is replete with destructive interpretations of scripture. Thousands were killed during the Reformation's Thirty Years War over the Pontiff's 'transubstantiation' or Luther's 'consubstantiation' when 'bread' does not mean, literally, 'flesh'. Likewise today, callous and derogatory sayings such as "God made Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve", are indications that we so often make the same errors as Jesus' detractors when we interpret scripture, in this case the Creation Story, *too* literally.

So, what do I believe? First and foremost, scripture for me is Gospel. It is 'good news'. The emphasis is on 'good'. Therefore,

scripture is to be used to build-up, to strengthen, to empower and to inspire. Scripture is not to be used as a weapon to bludgeon and to condemn people. Second, because scripture is for me 'good news', it communicates to me that God is Love. Therefore, scripture is to bring you and I closer together in love and to bring all of us closer to God. Scripture therefore is not intended to drive us away from one another nor is it to be articulated so as to separate people from God.



These past weeks, a member of our own faith community, the United Church of Christ, has been receiving death threats. Read the United Kingdom's *Independent*, the *Burlington Free Press*, *Newsweek* ... One of our own, the nation's first transgender gubernatorial candidate, is receiving death threats. Make no mistake about it. Those threats are ultimately motivated by biblical literalism, by an interpretation that is hateful and violent.



I am proud to be called to serve this church because before I arrived it declared itself to be an Open and Affirming congregation. It declared itself to be a church that proclaims the Gospel of Jesus Christ and Christ sought-out and brought to wholeness those who were most ostracized by the society of his day.



Against death threats, Christine would have my support [and I am not talking about *political* support) even if she were a Republican. Against death threats, Christine would have my support, even if she remained male. Against death threats, Christine would have my support, even if she were heterosexual. Against death threats, Christine would have my support, even if she did not belong to the United Church of Christ.

Why do I stake this stand? Christine and I share the same table, in the same wider church. And Jesus said it: “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them” (John 6:56). So it is with Christine and I. So, it is with you and I. So it is with all of us.

This was the word of God, and it was preached to the people of God, and the people of God responded: “Amen”!