

August 26, 2018 **The Uncomfortable Pew** **Dave Feick**

What an eventful couple of days it had been. People had come from miles around, from towns, cities, villages, out into the countryside to follow and listen to Jesus. He taught them, performed miracles, healed all sorts of ailments, and it had been very good.

Then, with 5000 plus people gathered on the hillside, listening to Jesus teaching them, Jesus suggested to his disciples that they give the people something to eat. The problem was that they were fishermen, not caterers and they hadn't been fishing in a while either. They had no way of acquiring the amount of food it would take to feed all those people. Even if they had gone out onto the lake and fished, there's no guarantee they would have caught anything. Wait, no Jesus was there, he could have just told them where to throw their nets. But even if they had caught enough for everyone to eat, I don't imagine there were barbecues for cooking.

They didn't know what to do. But then a boy with his lunch basket came forward, and suddenly there was food enough for all and leftovers to boot. Whether everyone pulled out their own lunches when they saw the boy's lunch, or whether, as the story is told, Jesus had miraculously stretched that boy's small lunch into enough for everyone, all were satisfied.

Later that evening, as the disciples rowed across the lake against the wind and the waves, Jesus came walking on the water and joined them in the boat.

The next day was much like the first. Again the crowds gathered, wondering how Jesus had made it across the lake without a boat. After running around the lake themselves to find Jesus, they were hungry again and they hoped he might feed them again.

But Jesus told them to forget about their empty stomachs and trying to fill them with the kind of food that does not last. Rather seek food that endures for eternal life. Work for the food which the Son of Man gives.

Okay, so what kind of work do we do that will earn us this food? The work of God, Jesus said, is to believe in the One that God has sent. Okay, they answered, then give us a sign so that we can believe in you! God gave our ancestors manna in the wilderness, can't you give us more food as well?

So let me put it this way, says Jesus. I am the bread of life. I have come down from heaven. I am the manna that you seek. Feed on me. Eat my flesh. Drink my blood.

Wait a minute! How can you say you have come down from heaven? We know your parents, your family. We know where you were born and raised. What are you trying to pull here?

No, Jesus said, you do not know me. But if you eat my flesh and drink my blood, I will be part of you and you will have eternal life.

This was not the sign people were looking for. Suddenly, Jesus' words were no longer so appealing. They loved it when he challenged the political and religious leaders – letting them know that he was not pleased with their attitudes and actions. But this kind of talk made no

sense. Were they to become cannibals? Was this some strange sort of self-sacrifice he was promoting? Eat his flesh? Drink his blood?

Maybe all this was just too good to be true. Turns out this Jesus is just another eccentric, an oddball, a fanatic. Just like all the other prophets of old. He's saying things to make us uncomfortable. If he's going to talk like that and not give us something to eat, then we'll leave.

As many of his close followers walked away, Jesus asked the twelve if they also wanted to leave. But Peter comes up with another good answer in the form of a question. Where would we go? You have the words of eternal life!

In 1965, Pierre Berton wrote a book entitled, *The Comfortable Pew*. Some of you may have read it. Some of you may be wondering who Pierre Berton was. Some of you may not have thought much of Pierre Berton or his book. Whether or not you liked him and his writing or broadcasting, he was well known as a journalist, an author, a historian and more. I tried to find out on the Internet whether he was known as a churchgoer but found nothing to that effect. Perhaps it was for this reason that he was asked to write a book from an outsider's point of view. I'd say an unbiased point of view, but from what I remember about him, I wonder if he didn't have an opinion on pretty much everything.

I have to admit that I haven't read the book, I've only had opportunity to read reviews and hear others' responses to the book. Apparently it was commissioned by the Anglican Church's Religious Education Department and was an attempt to take a hard, critical but honest look at the state of the Church.

One reviewer, in contrast to many who accused Berton of seeking to destroy the church, thought that it gives good reminders of what the church should NOT do. Dr. Conrade Yap summarizes it this way:

In a nutshell, the author accuses the church of forgetting its main identity and what it first stands for. Broadly speaking, there are two main issues with church. Firstly, the church has become institutionalized in the sense that it is more concerned about conformity and keeping the status quo. Secondly, the church is in danger of being fossilized because of its inability to stay relevant to the people and the society at large. Both of these contributes to the crisis of the church.

Written in 3 parts, the first part talks about how the Church has abdicated its leadership by not standing up for social justice, for rightful ethical business practices and for a more relevant engagement with society. The second part, Berton accuses the church of becoming more an establishment to be preserved rather than a calling toward counter-cultural behavior. In the third part, Berton laments that the church has failed to communicate adequately, and missed the opportunity to stay relevant. He attacks the tendency of the church to assume absolute rightness. He says that the archaic use of liturgical terms are incomprehensible to most people. He blames the poor pulpit qualities, and that sermons tend to be irrelevant and boring. He also complains that the church is not open enough to using modern tools to communicate the message. Finally,

he seeks to see a church that is able to confidently practice faith without insisting on members to believe absolutely its dogmas prior to membership.

Thankfully, Berton ends the book with an optimistic prescription that revolution is possible. However, one needs to count the cost.

“But there seem to be two ways in which a truly Christian reformation could come about. It could come about through some terrifying persecution of the Christian Church – a persecution that would rid the Church of those of little faith, of the status-seekers and respectability-hunters, of the deadwood who enjoy the club atmosphere, of the ecclesiastical hangers-on and the comfort-searchers. Once the Church becomes the most uncomfortable institution in the community, only those who really matter will stick with it. At this point, one would expect the Church to come back to those basic principles of love, faith, and hope that have made martyrs out of men.” (142-3)¹

I think that today we could be equally critical and say that in general, not a lot has changed since 1965. It seems that much of the things that many of us find distasteful in our world today, particularly in politics, we also find to be supported by a Christian church that has become far too comfortable with its dogmas and something of a favoured position in society and it isn't interested so much in the social issues that are really at the heart of what some of us at least believe to be the message of Christ.

We want to be doers of the Word and not hearers only. Like the 12, we want to eat Jesus' flesh and drink his blood so that he might truly be part of us, though we may not know just what that means, rather than walking away disgusted by such thoughts.

Still, we don't really want to be made to feel uncomfortable in our pews do we?

Loretta said she couldn't find any songs that talked about being uncomfortable. I had thought of suggesting that she choose songs that we don't know that well, or songs that might be a bit discordant to make us a bit uncomfortable, but there might not be a lot of those in our hymnals either.

But there are likely to be certain passages of scripture that make us uncomfortable. I wonder sometimes about this morning's passage from Ephesians. Do we, as pacifists, find this armor imagery a little hard to read or listen to? I have noticed that when we sing “Be Thou My Vision” we often omit the verse that says, “Be thou my buckler, my sword for the fight.” I wonder why we do that. Is there something about that imagery that we just don't like? Isn't it calling on God to fight for us? Maybe, given Paul's words in Ephesians, it's expecting more of God than we should. Then again, there's a song in one of the hymnals telling us to “Be still, God will fight your battles.”

So, if then, God is fighting our battles, then why does Paul say that we need to put on the armor of God?

¹ <http://yapdates.blogspot.com/2010/07/book-comfortable-pew-pierre-ber-ton.html>

I don't know. It feels like I've got more questions than answers today.

I imagine that it's possible that while he was writing this, Paul was in prison, with armored guards all around him. Looking at that day after day, how could he not find an object lesson for followers of God? Hey, we should all protect ourselves as well, because we're fighting spiritual battles. Yes, God is taking care of the great battle with Satan, so we're told in the Bible, but there's still all these other battles we face each and every day.

For the most part, you and I probably don't get caught up in the spiritual warfare language that many Christians do. I'm not sure why that is either. Though I do know that it makes me feel uncomfortable. Because I know people who claim to have seen things or beings that I have never seen, and neither am I interested in seeing them.

But just because I don't see them and don't want to see them and don't even want to think about them, doesn't mean they don't exist. And when people talk about them, I have to think they are either delusional, have some mental health issues, are on drugs, or that there is something really there. And if the Bible talks about them, then there must be something.

Last week, someone came to my office and talked about what sounded very much like spiritual warfare. Though he embraced Christianity for a while, he now claims no such faith and seeks to more or less do his own thing. He does smudge and follow some of the traditional ways of his culture. And his family members talk to him about hearing voices, telling them that they are to harm him, even to kill him. Why? Because he has light in him and whatever was speaking to them didn't like that he had the light.

I really don't know what to make of such talk. But I can't help but wonder, is it because I am wearing the armor of God that I don't see what they see? Am I being protected by the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, the sword of the Spirit and shoes to proclaim the gospel of peace?

Or is it because I don't really want to see what's out there?

Well, I'm not really trying to make you feel uncomfortable this morning. It just strikes me that the Gospel isn't always exactly what people want to hear. I have a book in my library entitled, "The hard sayings of Jesus." I don't know how many there are in the book, but I'm sure there could be a whole lot more.

Jesus' words challenged the status quo because many of the people had become comfortable in their pews, in their practices, in their beliefs.

Maybe the challenge for us when we read these words is to ensure that we also not become too comfortable. It seems to me that when we do begin to get comfortable, that's when we're faced with something new to challenge our thinking, our habits, even our beliefs.

I recall when I was about to begin my studies at the Lutheran Seminary, someone asked me why I would do that. Wasn't I concerned about the truth?

I was able to reply that there's lots of truth out there and none of us has a handle on it. There's always more truth for us to learn, more to understand, more to challenge our long held beliefs. And I'm okay with that.

But at the same time, that doesn't mean we need to accept every new teaching that comes along. There's armor for that too, helping us to be discerning what is the truth. Prayer, keeping in close touch with the one who created us and sustains us helps us to see what is light and to also live in that light.

Jesus' words that made his hearers so uncomfortable in our scripture today, words that led those who opposed his teachings in those early years to declare Christians to be cannibals, based on the Eucharist, the eating of the body and blood of Christ, are words at the very heart of Christianity.

“As in the Exodus story, the issue is not simply the grumbling of the people but the lack of trust in God that it represents: “some of you do not believe” (John 6:64). The difficulty in John 6 is not simply the cognitive content of believing something about Jesus, but also the lack of trust that the disciples display. Like the Israelites, they have experienced God's miraculous provision, but they do not trust that God will **continue** to provide for them in the wilderness.

To partake of Jesus as manna involves a reliance on God. One way John expresses this throughout the Gospel is through the word “abide” often translated “remain”: “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood remain in me and I in them.” Feeding on Jesus as manna means remaining or abiding with Jesus. It is through this proximity that Jesus brings life to those who eat (v. 57).

But “abiding” with Jesus is difficult. Staying with Jesus and learning from him is a long process. For many, a quick fix would be more attractive. The crowd was initially attracted to Jesus when they saw him as a Moses figure -- one who could work miracles and provide political victories. As they continue with him, they learn that Jesus is not offering an easy victory but the long road of discipleship.

On a narrative level, the twelve are shown in this passage as the ones who “abide” with Jesus. They stick with Jesus even though his teaching is difficult. Here, they recognize Jesus' words as life giving and do not turn away. In doing so, they represent what it means to trust that God will provide manna. They stick closely to Jesus, who is the manna, and they listen to his words. This is their only real option -- much like the Israelites stuck in the wilderness, whose only option is to return to slavery: “Lord, to whom would we go? You have the words of eternal life” (John 6:68).”²

² cwww.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3753

We need to continually invite Jesus to be so much a part of us that it is like we have ingested him into our very beings. I don't think imagery that needs to make us uncomfortable. But I also don't think we need to become so comfortable in our pew, that we lose interest in allowing Jesus to shake us up once in a while and help us to see and hear and learn something new and different.

Perhaps our pew needs to be a bit uncomfortable so that we don't want to stay here, but to go out and to do the will of God, to follow the footsteps of Jesus, to carry out the gospel message – putting on those shoes to proclaim the gospel of peace.

Life, the Christian life, contrary to what many believe calls us to change, new understandings, new growth, and to faith in the One who calls us to be part of him by asking us to receive him.

Where else can we go?

He has eternal life.