

“Staying with and Standing with Jesus” based on Ephesians 6:10-20 and John 6:53-71
Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on August 22, 2021, at Shelby Presbyterian Church

NOTE: Pastor Drew will be including a transcript of the sermon from the previous Sunday in the mailing for the upcoming Sunday each week. You can watch the service on Facebook or Youtube.

In one episode of the TV show Scrubs, the main character, who is a young doctor in training. He has a suspicion about one of his patients and begins to fear the man has leukemia. The problem for the young doctor is that this patient is someone he really likes, and he is the closest personal friend of this young doctor’s mentor.

The patient has been roaming the hospital with jokes and a camera, taking polaroid pictures and spreading joy everywhere. When the young doctor gets the patient’s chart, and it says the very diagnosis he feared. So, the young doctor goes on a quest to prove the leukemia results are wrong. He does this even though before the tests were done, he already suspected it was leukemia. He does not want to accept a reality that goes against not what he knows, but what he wants. He’s looking for an answer he wants to hear, not necessarily the truth.

One step in his journey is to the hematopathologist, who is portrayed like the Wizard of Oz. He is someone about whom there are legends of his wrath and power and vengeance. There is even a scene with a blood-stained window in his office. The young doctor goes off to tell the hematopathologist that he made a mistake. Fearfully, he stands before a man who is not like the legends that he had heard, and the young doctor sputters and stammers, ‘you made a mistake.’ And the kind, smiling hematopathologist takes the patient file, and gently asks, ‘Do you really think I made a mistake? Or do you just wish that I made a mistake?’ The young doctor now faces the truth. ‘I kind of wish you made a mistake.’ The results are rechecked, and it’s confirmed. He has leukemia.

When I took the COVID test yesterday, I hoped that it was wrong. I almost took the test again and was ready to keep taking it until I got a negative result. Being positive for COVID was not the answer I wanted to hear. The packaging says 98+ percent accurate on positive tests and 85 percent on negative, so I knew the chance of this being a false positive was small. Still, I wanted to test again and again and again, until I got the answer I wanted.

This is a normal human behavior. We don’t like when things do not line up with our vision of how they should be. It’s the same behavior we see in the people who followed Jesus to the shores of Lake Galilee, those to whom he gave this speech on him being the bread of life. You see, this is the final scene in John’s gospel related to the miracle of the feeding of the 5,000. This miracle is in all four gospels and three have it immediately followed by Jesus walking on water. John has that, but then John adds after that, this bread of life discourse where Jesus is challenging people to stay with him because he is speaking of a really weird idea – that we would eat his body, drink his blood.

The easy thing to do here is assume this is solely relating to communion or the Lord’s Supper. But what I think Jesus in how John presents this, is primarily trying to show that the tangible being, the physical person in front of them, is like the manna descended from heaven and he is all they need in their life. What’s more, he is also the true bread. He is divine.

For the reading in our service, I did my own translation for today, to both give you a new look at this familiar verse, but also to point out some things from the Greek you might otherwise miss. One of those things is the word for eating. You see the word John uses for Jesus describing 'eating his flesh' is one for chewing, for savoring. The word used for the fathers eating the manna is one more akin to 'consuming.' It's about the food getting into the belly for nourishment. Jesus is using a word more about savoring. One is what I did last night when Claire brought me food and I scarfed it down. That is what the fathers did with the manna. What I hope to do when I am better is go to a restaurant, outside, and take the time to savor a meal.

This is important because it helps us understand the larger message of this. You see that's what we are supposed to do when we dive into God's word. We are not to just consume it and be done. We are to chew on it and savor it. In John's prologue, Jesus is revealed as the Word made flesh. And so by portraying this foundation, when we get to Jesus saying that we are to eat his flesh and drink his blood, he is making clear that he is God in human form, and this is hard for them to deal with.

You see, after the feeding of the 5,000, at the height of Jesus's popularity on the other side of the lake he walked across, they wanted to make him King. Why? Because he provided them with bread. The people saw him as someone who could meet their needs. The leaders saw him as someone who could be valuable in advancing their causes, especially in overthrowing Rome. Anyone who could produce that much food is going to be to their advantage. It's not the Jesus who really is, that they want. It's the Jesus they think they can manipulate.

That is an important thing we need to remember when we read scripture – Every single one of us reads scripture through the lens of our own experience, our own mindset. If we read scripture and it confirms everything that we already believe, we are probably reading it wrong. If so, we are consuming, not chewing. The reality is that the Jesus who really is, is so hard for us to deal with. He challenges our world view and overturns the mindset of this world.

In churches, we may be good at speaking the Christianese language, and today we will read the Nicene Creed and claim that we believe this, and certainly I pray that we all do. But the truth it contains is hard to believe, namely that the creator of all things became a human, a tangible being in our flesh, in our weakness. This idea is not easy to understand or just accept. We sometimes lean too far toward him being God as a super human and sometimes we view him as too human, because we struggle to think that he is God. And so we have this mystery, that he is both 100 percent human and 100 percent God. That not an easy thing to grasp and that's what they struggled with at the water's edge.

Likewise, introduces for us another thing that is sometimes difficult for us to understand as Christians. Sometimes we make Jesus out to be something different as well. At the start of the book of Ephesians, Paul points out that Jesus Christ stands above the principalities, the authorities and the world's rulers. That language is in the first chapter and comes back in the end, when Paul tells us to put on God's armor because we are not battling against blood and flesh, but against these principalities, the authorities and the world's rulers.

And so, I think often we as Christians think our enemy is the person across the room or on social media who is speaking ill about us, about what we believe and even about Jesus. But our enemy is

not flesh and blood. Our enemy is the principalities, the authorities, and the world's rulers of darkness. It's not popular in Western Culture to talk about the devil or bad spirits or evil as an entity. But the reality we might come to if we really think about, there are some things we can't explain. What about ourselves when we do things that we think are against our character? What about the systems that were created with good intentions but perpetuate injustice? What about the idea that power corrupts even those with the best hearts?

But more directly, what about those times we say, 'I'm not someone who would do that.' I will confess. I care about wearing masks to prevent the spread of COVID. I wear masks in the stores. I believe our kids in school should be wearing them and have taught my kids to be comfortable in them. Yet, knowing I work around a vaccinated staff, I let my guard down. I would tell you, 'masks, masks, masks,' but I didn't do it. I did not do what I wanted to do. I was driven by something I didn't want – a selfish motive, or more. Now, I face the consequence of my action.

And so, Paul tells us that is our enemy and we are not to just go out and punch someone in the face because they disagree, or worse, start a war. In fact, what happens with this armor? It's really incredible, you put all of this armor on and it's to do one thing – Stand. That's it. Hold your ground. Not attack. Not defend yourself. Just stand. Your sword is the Word of God. It's not your sword, it's God's word on your behalf. You have no real offensive weapon, just God working for you.

Everything in the armor is for your defense, while God is the one fighting the larger battle for us. That's often not the Jesus we want. The reality is that when God entered into our human form, Jesus did not start a war to overthrow Rome but submitted to being crucified on a cross, a cross reserved for slaves and rebels. He was crucified to show love – that no matter what this world has to oppose us, God is greater. Sin and death are this world's only powers and they are conquered at the cross. That is what we hold on to.

It doesn't mean we are patsies and pushovers, but it means that we stay with Jesus. We stay, regardless of if Jesus makes us feel uncomfortable, asking us to be more principled than we want to be. He tells us things like to insult someone is liable to the same punishment as murdering someone. Thanks Jesus. It's really hard sometimes not to insult someone, especially if they perhaps cut you off on the road. I'm pretty good at avoiding murder, but insults is a much lower bar.

The gospel is challenging and should always be challenging, but we stand with it and we stay with it, not because we believe everything perfectly, but because we are humble enough to know that we are not perfect and in need of help. We are validated in our humility because we see for us a God who is humble enough to have shared in our humanity, lived as we live, died for us and rose again for us.

Friends, this world is a mess and it can be hard for us to deal with. I often look around and say, 'Why?' Why doesn't God just extinguish COVID? Why doesn't God end war? Why doesn't God prevent these natural disasters? Why doesn't Jesus come back now, please?

But the focal point of our faith, that God, the Son, the Word, became human in Jesus, should give us some perspective. The world was a mess at the time of Jesus – arguably worse, as you could be killed arbitrarily by Rome on the spot, strung up and crucified with no public outcry. They did this just to keep the people under control. There was no middle-class life. The common cold was a death

sentence as COVID is now and life expectancy was in the 30s. Life was hard. That is the world which God entered into.

That was the world in which God said, 'I am going to stand with you in solidarity, and I am going to prove my faithfulness to stay with you.' That is why I call on us to stay with Jesus like the 12 did, even when the teachings are hard. And I call on us to stand with Jesus in solidarity, as the one who died for us, rose for us and will come again to bring about a new creation. That is our hope, and that is why his life, death and resurrection are such good news.