

The question of the hour seems to be whether we will spend our time on an absolutely revolting description of the Sacrament of Holy Communion or instead a statement that has been used down through the years, with a few others, to endorse an exclusively Christian claim on salvation.

We can dispense with the communion question fairly quickly. No, Jesus doesn't mean we're going to eat his actual body. I know you all know this, and while I understand perfectly well that quite an odd bit of discussion and even quite a bit of odd discussion has centered on precisely this question, that just isn't what he meant. And no, the early church didn't engage in any practices to my knowledge that would lend credibility to the most literal interpretations. But still, I do get that, "it's creepy," to quote one of you. And probably in light of the creepiness of the verbiage around our own sacrament, we should be reasonably circumspect about painting with too broad a brush about the ritual practices of other faiths. Here endeth the lesson on the pitfalls of selective literal interpretation.

Which simply leaves us with the far thornier, to my mind, discussion about persons of other faiths. If indeed, Jesus has the words of eternal life, to whom indeed, can anyone go?

Some of you may remember the firestorm of criticism that surrounded evangelical pastor Rob Bell's book last year, Love Wins.

At the beginning of the book, he describes an exhibition that begged the question whether Gandhi, a deceased Hindu, is in fact in hell.

Bell concluded no. I remember once a friend of mine was opining about matters of the scope of salvation and added about a friend of ours, a rabbi, “If one can conceive of a notion of heaven that doesn’t include Rabbi Judy, I’m not interested in it.”

I suspect most, if not all, of us know someone who is not of the Christian faith whose goodness leaves us pondering questions of heaven and hell.

Mostly I suspect they leave us pondering hell.

Hell was used as a deterrent for undesirable activities for such a long time. It still is sometimes.

Don’t do that, you’ll go to hell.

Don’t think that, you’ll go to hell.

Don’t (insert activity), or you’ll go to hell!

Leaving aside the striking reality that many modern understandings of hell have absolutely no basis even in an irresponsible reading of scripture, let alone a responsible reading that takes into account context, Greek and Hebrew translations and literary genre, for whatever reason any time we encounter the words, “eternal life,” that just naturally seems to be where our minds go. The questions jump up, “who’s in, who’s out, and how’s that determined?”

Various passages of scripture, including today’s, force us to take a moment and consider what the answers to those questions may be.

Now I’ll tell you my bias, just so we’re clear. I take an orthodox view of scripture, tempered by a strong universalist hope. Which is to say, I recognize that there are some sheep and goats passages and that we have to do something with them. And I also recognize that Jesus uses the words, “all,” “everyone,” “the world,” and other such words

a lot. He uses them an awful lot, actually. They leave me with a strong hunch/hope that they mean what they say.

The history of interpretation didn't always go that way.

Even John Calvin, who had an astonishing amount of humility in his theological claims was willing centuries ago to declare readily what the scope of salvation was. Well, actually he was willing to set a cap on it.

The maximum cap was the church visible, with a few additional saints and martyrs thrown in. That was the folks you see church on any given Sunday. They were eligible to be in the church invisible, which is the smaller subset of the folks who were actually elect. (Elect was Calvin's way of saying saved. God "elected" a few for salvation for God's glory.)

That's a gross simplification, but it's close enough for government work, which is what Calvin did.

Passages such as this, which say, "Lord you have the words of eternal life," suggest that some will hear them, some will not, and thus will the difference be settled.

For Calvin and the Calvinists, God elected some to hear the word, and they are the elect.

It is only through the action of the Holy Spirit that some believe when the word is heard.

What is important to remember in reading Calvin is that, above all, Calvin was terribly concerned with preserving our understanding of God's *sovereignty*. In a world where life expectancy was low and infant mortality was high, the idea that somebody might actually be in charge was a pastoral doctrine, designed to comfort. The world might appear to be falling apart around you, but God remains sovereign over it all. Nothing is left to chance.

By the time we get around to the evangelical revivalism of the United States in our formative years, Calvin's way of looking at the gospel seemed terribly undemocratic. The idea that there are some elite persons (most of whom were naturally Presbyterian) whom God has chosen seemed problematic. The evangelical revivalists, whom we now may see as narrowing the scope of salvation because of some narrow definitions of behavior, were in fact at their heart seeking to broaden it, to spread the Gospel far and wide. Where Calvin would write of the hope of salvation, the revivalists began to write of the assurance of salvation.

This is covering hundreds of years of interpretive history in a blink, but where Calvin said roughly, "God's in charge, trust God, and rest easily," the revivalists expanded their reach saying, "Make a decision for Christ and rest easily."

This is the heart of Billy Graham's preaching.

And so we've bridged four hundred years of theology seeking answers to the simple questions of "who's in and who's out?"

And for a very long time, the world was a Christian-centric place. At least the world that wrote the history was, and so a certain amount of cultural snobbery flourished. Please note: I didn't say Christo-centric, which would suggest that all things center on Christ and his teachings, but rather *Christian*-centric, meaning all things center on Christians and our dominance of the modernizing world. In such a world-view, the progression of faith is such that we are necessarily concerned with the ever-expanding base of Christian believers. If someone doesn't believe, they aren't "in" until such a time as apologetics or persuasion takes hold and the reasonableness of the dominant Christian viewpoint takes hold.

This is *not* a screed against Christians and our missionary efforts, certainly not from a Christian pulpit. I would do no such thing. It is, though simply an attempt to place history around our interpretation of scripture to understand that in every age we have looked at this passage and sought to tame it so as not to invite judgment on ourselves. In other words, if we can make this passage about salvation and who's in and who's out, well, that's easier than facing the Jesus has the words of eternal life that *we* need to hear. And the words we need to hear are bigger than "do this and don't go to hell," or "don't do this and go to hell," or any permutation thereof.

However interesting the history of interpretation may be, even in an overview, I would never want to confuse it with the Gospel.

So the first point I want to make about this passage with its exclusive flavor is this: whatever it says about salvation, it says it alongside every other word of the Gospel about salvation. Where it says that no one comes to Jesus except by the will of the father, it says it alongside, "Come to me all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest." And where it says, "does this offend you," it says it alongside, "My yoke is easy and my burden is light."

But it does ask the question, "perhaps you, too, want to turn aside?"

A worthwhile question. Who hasn't considered it?

Have you? Have you ever thought, "Oh good Lord, forgiveness is tough, I'd much rather nurse this grudge."

Or maybe the thought has occurred to you, "my pledge sure would make a nice trip to Belize and I'm awfully tired. Let someone else carry the water for a change."

Or just maybe it goes a little more like this, "We've got tonight... who needs tomorrow?"

I just have a hunch that when Jesus asked his disciples whether or not they wanted to turn aside when they realized that the Gospel is demanding, indeed when it actually became offensive, he wasn't really talking about whether or not they were interested in being saved or not.

Jesus is always talking about living water and bread of life and other such things in John. And he talks about other things too, things like sacrifice, and taking up crosses.

Jesus is always talking about things that seem so against the grain, so counter-intuitive.

He seems to want so much to make people take a different path, in some cases a harder path and right there in John's Gospel narrative, many turn aside.

Perhaps you want to turn aside also?

You wouldn't be the first.

God has always asked God's people to be different.

I was in Sunday school last week and we were talking about one of the lessons and I hazarded the notion that what God wants for us is to be decidedly different, to be decidedly against most of what is often settled for as acceptable. No sooner had I made the declaration than one of our members offered the prosaic observation,

"Well, that'll get your lunch money stolen!"

God's people have a long and storied history of getting our lunch money stolen.

Take the ancient Israelites we read about this morning, charged to make their lives a marker of the God who led them out of slavery.

You see, God has a long history of acting on behalf of those who need God's help, and then asking them to tell the story.

Why? Because that is who God is.

Indeed that takes us back to our very origins, that God didn't create us because of any deficiency, any lack in God's being, but rather, out of the overflowing of God's love. And God didn't redeem us because God couldn't do without us but because of the perfection of God's love.

When you think of it that way, I tend to think of the reduction of the bread of life to a question of "who's in and who's" out as rather missing the point.

The heart of Johannine theology is sacrificial. John, unlike the other Gospels, makes it very clear that the story of Jesus' life and ministry is that he will be the sacrifice for the sins of the world. Where the Synoptic Gospels tell us the story of Jesus and his disciples sharing a Passover meal as the last supper in the upper room, John alone changes the order of the telling of the story so that Jesus himself is the Passover lamb on whom all the sin of the world is taken so that the world might be redeemed.

I suppose I'm relapsing to my deeply Presbyterian roots and reverting to the heart of Calvin's theology – that we don't need to spend our time thinking about who is in and who is out because God has that all taken care of. And that God is love. And that out of the abundance of God's love, Christ was begotten. And that in Jesus Christ, God was reconciling the world to God's self. And out of the perfection of God's love, Christ was faithful unto death. And out of the power of God's love Christ was raised to new life and so we hope in the resurrection.

And where this leaves us is that whatever questions we have of who's in and who's out, whatever our concerns about persons of other faith and persons of no faith, wherever this leaves us when our own faith wavers and fails is resting, now as always, on the everlasting love of God.

And where does the everlasting love of God leave us?

It leaves us in prime position to get our lunch money stolen. The Johannine theology of Christ as sacrifice also comes with the expectation that we follow Jesus, even as God's people have always been called to live the love of God.

Perhaps you, too, wish to turn aside?

To whom can we go?

Down through the ages mystics and prophets have sounded the clarion to remember that God is love and that God demands love.

That's hard. Perhaps you wish to turn aside?

Perhaps we'd rather talk about who's in and who's out?

Perhaps we'd rather, like Aquinas, hypothesize about how many angels can dance on the head of a pin?

Or we can get down to the hard work of living God's love.

I know that can be a bit vague at times, so perhaps these lines of Dostoevsky will leave us with a clear call,

“Love people even in their sin, for that is the semblance of Divine Love and is the highest love on earth. Love all of God's creation, the whole and every grain of sand of it. Love every leaf, every ray of God's light. Love the animals, love the plants, love everything. If you love everything, you will perceive the divine mystery in things. Once you perceive it, you will begin to comprehend it better every day. And you will come at last to love the whole world with an all-embracing love.”

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.