



Hear the Word

from Pastor Paul E. Hoffman

Gather... Encourage... Equip... Send...

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

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John 6:51-58

The gospel according to Paul Hoffman says that there are two kinds of people in the world: people who use their directional signals while driving, and people who do not. It's clear and simple. There's no wiggle room. You either use a blinker or you don't. If you're a person in front of me who uses their signals, then you are my new best friend. You must have had great parents. I bet you'd be fun at a party. I'm pretty sure we'd see things eye to eye. I actually hope there's a red light in the not-too-distant future that's long enough for me to jump out, run up, and meet you.

On the other hand, if you have NOT used your directional signal, then the Gospel of Paul Hoffman – at least while driving – is that you must be a horrible, horrible person. Who raised you, anyway?

Two kinds of people. Those who use them. Those who don't.

Now before you get all beside yourself about what an awful person I must be to so clearly divide the world into two parts, let me defend this by saying that I think I'm standing on some pretty firm footing here. Today's Old Testament reading, for example. According to Proverbs, Ms. Wisdom likes her clear divisions of the world as well. This brief passage ends with a clear distinction: you are either a person of immaturity, or a person of insight. To the simple, to the immature, Lady Wisdom offers opportunity. Turn in at my place, and have some Wisdom Bread. Drink some of the metaphorical wine that will wise you up. But still, there is that distinction: you are either a person of insight, or you are not. It is one way or the other.

And the Second Lesson falls right in line with the Paul Hoffman Turn Signal Gospel and the Proverbs Gospel according to Lady Wisdom. There's a theme here...

"Be careful then, how you live, not as unwise people, but as wise."

"Do not be foolish. Be understanding."

You either get the will of the Lord, or you don't. You are either wise, or you're not.

So there you have it. Maybe one of the simplest most straightforward lessons at church, ever. Two kinds of people. 1) You want to be one who uses your signals. 2) Strives for Wisdom's insight. 3) Live as wise people live.

And that would be that. Except. There's one MORE Gospel for today. The Gospel of Jesus, according to St. John, the 6th chapter. I just read it to you.

And this reading from John, like most of John, is quite a bit more complicated than choosing either/or. [True, it does have the either or of the bread the ancestors ate and died over and against the bread that comes down from heaven, which affords those who eat of it to live forever. But beyond that, the text,] the words of Jesus are so complicated. So unexpected. So, well, kind of offensive, actually. Listen:

The bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.

Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life.

My flesh is true food and my blood is true drink.

Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.

These strange and confusing words about flesh and blood are hard enough for us to hear, even with our understanding of and connection of them to communion. But for a Jew, for those who were the original hearers of these words of Jesus, there was such a strong aversion to, in fact a Levitical prohibition against taking in the blood, even of animals, that to hear Jesus talking about drinking his blood, human blood, was nothing short of insanity. Not to mention the kind of complication these words would bring down upon the followers of Jesus from the likes of their Roman oppressors.

When you think too hard about it, it really makes you want to go back to the simple, straightforward do's and don'ts of Proverbs or Ephesians, doesn't it? Why is Jesus making it all so complicated? But there it is. Eat my body. Drink my blood.

There was an interview I heard recently in which the topic, of all things, was why people do and do not use their directional signals while driving. There was one interviewee whose response I will never forget. After admitting that he was one of the people in the "rarely uses directional signals" category, the interviewer asked him, "Why is it that you choose not to use your turn signals while driving?" And his response was simple and – at least to me – absolutely shocking: "Because it's nobody's business where I'm going but my own."

"It's nobody's business where I'm going but my own."

When you think about it, driving on shared roadways is an act of trust. We trust that the other person is going to drive on the correct side of the road. We trust that those behind us are going to keep a safe enough following distance so as to not run into us if we suddenly stop. We trust that others sharing the streets and highways with us will stop for a red light, or slow down for a hazard. We trust that others will let us know when they're planning to turn right or left so that we can be alert and react accordingly. It actually IS somebody else's business where we are going. The roads are a shared commodity. They belong to us all. And they belong to us all, together. And sharing something as necessary and as widely used as the streets and highways is complicated. There are simple do's and don'ts, but there is always also the need for judgment and flexibility. The more information we have from one another, the better. It makes a difference in such an act of trust to know that someone else has your back.

To the late first-century Christians for whom John wrote about Jesus, there was a deep need to know that someone had their backs. In an act of trust as radical as following Jesus, it was important to know that this complicated fellow who had lived and died and rose again was so intimately connected to them, and to their ever-changing world, that it was like he was inside their very body. John reminds early, perplexed followers of Jesus' blood pulsing through them like their very own blood, his thoughts and presence with them – quite literally --- under their skin.

John's words are a reminder to them and to all of us that in a world so complicated, so unhinged, to baffling as the world that human beings inhabit, the Christ is as close to us, as much a part of us as our own heart beat, our own collective body.

There is no doubt but that Jesus' words stirred up controversy and conflict to both those who heard them and those who tried to live by them. After 2000 years of Christian history, we should all realize that controversy and conflict are no strangers to the followers of Jesus. We live in a world that neither understands him, nor cares to try.

But in case you hadn't noticed, few things in life are simple binaries, simply either/or. I often need to remind myself that they guy who didn't use his signal may have other things on his mind. Perhaps he's just received a life-altering diagnosis, or was making funeral arrangements for his wife. It isn't as simple as the media would have us believe – American politics are more complicated than red states and blue states. We can never know what pain and sorrow in his own personal life the nicest guy at the office swallows every day in order to put on a happy face to make our lives more enjoyable. Despite the "words of wisdom" from Proverbs and Ephesians, even the wisest among us have moments of immaturity and bad judgment. Sometimes, it is from the simple that the voice of the Spirit most clearly speaks.

It is into such complicated, complex lives as this the Christ comes with wisdom that surpasses wisdom. He comes with foolishness that insists that death has been defeated and life is forever restored. Into such complicated, complex lives as ours the Christ comes with the assurance that whatever stir his words and deeds may bring to the community of faith in this world, in the end it is his desire to be so deeply among us and inside us that it is as if our bodies were filled with that new life of which he speaks, and our veins flowing with the life that can come only from him, "the Lord and giver of life."

It's a hard pill to swallow. No doubt about it. But it's the Gospel truth. Jesus is in the deepest, messiest, most untidy, complicated places of our lives with us. And he's never letting go.

In the name of the Father, and of the (✠) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.