

CHRIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH, SPARTA, NC
PENTECOST 11(P15B), August 16, 2009
The Rev. J. Barry Kramer
"Take No Offense!"

"Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life...." (John 6:54 NRSV)

[An apple was used for the youth homily]

So tell me, were any of you adults offended by this little "apple" talk? The reason I asked is because once upon a time, a certain young priest (who shall remain forever nameless!) stood up one Sunday morning during the Service to give a short talk to the young people in his congregation. He invited them to come up front (it was a large church), and he asked them to sit at his feet. Suddenly he pulled out an apple, much like the one I used this morning, and his trusty Swiss Army knife, and upon quoting that old proverb "an apple a day keeps the doctor away," he began cutting the apple into slices and gave them to the children to eat. The children thought it was great, but several of the parents were quite offended! It seemed that eating apples during the Service was not kosher! The priest was simply trying to illustrate, as I did, the idea that Jesus wants us to "ingest" him, spiritually speaking. But the parents could only focus on the apple,

the priest, and the offense that they had taken.

Think for a moment about the last time you were offended. Who were the people involved? What was the issue? Was it really all that important? Was it perhaps only a misunderstanding? How, if ever, was the whole thing resolved?

If you were unable to recall being offended, you are indeed a rare and beautiful species of apple! If, on the other hand, an instance immediately popped into mind, be not distressed, rather take heart, for you are in good company. Down through the centuries, many good people, whether dressed in thick or thin apple skins, have been and will continue to be *offended!* This fact is shown nowhere more clearly than in our text for today. *"Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life...."*

At the end of the Gospel lesson appointed for last Sunday, Jesus, probably standing in the Synagogue at Capernaum, having just concluded his long discourse in which he identified himself with the "bread of heaven," now goes on to say that the bread about which he is speaking is none other than *his own flesh!* How well I remember the chill that went down my spine as a

member of our tour group read these very words on that very spot about twenty years ago! How well I remember thinking, "what an offense these words must have been to the Jews!"

Indeed they were offended! Eating human flesh was not exactly kosher! Their displeasure became evident in verse 52: "*The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, 'How can this man give us his flesh to eat?'*" Pork was one thing, but they were *highly* offended and repulsed by the very idea of eating human flesh. Cannibalistic cultures aside, who wouldn't be? In fact, this statement seems almost grotesque until we realize what Jesus was trying to communicate.

As is often the case between preachers and congregations, Jesus and his hearers were not on the same wavelength. [Thank God it never happens around here!] He was speaking to them in figurative or parabolic language; but they heard only literally. Jesus often used stories, images, and word pictures to get his point across. That is what he was doing on this day when many of his hearers felt so offended. They thought Jesus had really gone off the deep end! But, are we any better off after being familiar with his words for nearly twenty centuries?

Think carefully for a moment about the words we use when the Holy Communion is distributed to each individual. "*The Body of Christ; the Bread of heaven: The Blood of Christ; the Cup of Salvation!*" Are you or have you ever been offended by those words? Have you ever found this or some other practice of the Christian Faith totally repulsive? Have you ever been so upset by someone's words or actions that you are ready to leave the church? Have you ever, when confronted by some issue that is repugnant to all that you have lived by and believed in, been ready to deny your faith itself? Oh Lord, how many times have we offended!

But let's return to our lesson and see if we can make sense of the offense. To the Jew who was listening at the time, the words of Jesus may have been repulsive, or at least strange. But to us, it is fairly obvious that what Jesus is talking about is none other than what we Episcopalians call the Doctrine of the Real Presence. The flesh and blood of Jesus is spiritually present in the bread and wine just as other nutrients are present in the apple! To put it most simply, to eat Jesus' flesh means to absorb him into our lives, just like we would an apple! Now, who could

possibly be offended by that idea? But some people are!

Perhaps people are offended by the idea of ingesting Jesus because there is no such thing as doing it halfway! You can't control the digestive process when you eat an apple. Likewise, you can't control the spiritual process once you have invited Jesus into your life. Sometimes *all of us* find that offensive! To say, for example, that Christianity is all or nothing is offensive to some people. But we are totally given to Christ or we are not given at all. The other side of the doctrine of the Real Presence is that Jesus challenges us to absorb him into our lives so that every aspect of our lives will be changed and challenged by his presence!

In other words, Christianity is not a faith for the easily offended. It is a tough-minded faith for people who want more than just a little dab of religion here and there to round out their lives. It is a faith that challenges and confronts us with things that might appear to offend. But, as we have seen, appearances are deceptive, and we need to get beyond them to the true meaning of things like "eating flesh and blood."

To eat the flesh and blood of Jesus has yet another true meaning. To eat Jesus' flesh also means that we accept the eternal life God offers us through Jesus. So let us be clear that the words *eternal life*, as they appear in the Bible and in our Prayer Book, mean at least two things at the same time. We usually think of eternal life as unending life - life that goes on and on forever. That certainly is part of it. But eternal life is more than life with God forever. It is also the *quality of life* we experience here and now when we take Christ into ourselves. Eternal life is a quality of existence today that is available to all, without offense!

We are here today because Christ has invited us to a banquet. In a very real sense, he himself is the meal. So come, eat the apple, enjoy eternal life, and be not offended!