

Sunday August 25<sup>th</sup>, 2024

John 6:56-69

“Many are Called by Few Will Follow”

Sales were stagnant at the insurance company where Daniel P. Amos worked as the chief executive. So, he decided to take a huge risk with a novel ad campaign that poked fun at the company’s name. The TV commercials featured an obnoxious white duck often getting injured and then loudly quacking “Aflaaaac.” The little-known business soon became a household name. Aflac’s stagnant US sales doubled between 1999 and 2003.

Amos told *The Wall Street Journal* that leading a company always involves taking risks. He said, “I like to manage risks [since] everything we do is risk related. [If you avoid risks] you are not taking a broad enough perspective for a company to succeed.”

Amos, now 70, learned to evaluate risks while studying risk management and insurance at the University of Georgia’s business school. Among his risk-taking advice he gave this nugget: Never risk a lot for a little. He added that he lives by that risk principle every day of his life. However, taking a risk carries with it a real chance of offending someone, or even a whole group of people.

All of us have encountered people who respond to something we said, or did, that offended them. We also know that when people are offended, more people than you might imagine, they “act out.” Whether straightforwardly or passive-aggressively, they’re motivated to retaliate against their (supposed) assailant. Yet most people whose words or actions are experienced as offensive, lack antagonistic intent. (See Psychology Today posting from October 13, 2021)

These predominately *innocent* offenders tend either to be insensitive, in that they don’t consider their interactional behavior in terms of its psychological effects—that is, as regards its likely impact on another’s thoughts and feelings. Or they simply don’t know enough about the other person’s history to predict what words or actions might disturb them. If you’re on the receiving end of a person’s bumbling or blundering behavior, and it’s fired up one of your hot buttons, you may not be able to avoid taking them personally.

But that hardly means their *intent* was personal, that the noxious motives you’re ascribing to them are valid. You might reflect on whether you’ve ever offended someone without realizing it until later—or not until the offended person brought it to your attention. In advance, you might not have imagined that what you did would be perceived anywhere as offensive as it was. Most of us, despite how much we may see ourselves as having evolved over time, still possess an ego more fragile than we typically realize.

So, it’s likely that your ego may be more vulnerable than you assumed to experiencing another’s behavior as hurtful, hostile, or threatening. Given the multitude of insecurities we’re subject to in growing up, there exists within us parts that—more than we’d like to admit—remain particularly sensitive to (largely presumed) criticism, abuse, or neglect. And with few exceptions, others are even less aware than we are about what, emotionally, we’re susceptible to and can’t help but (over) react to. In other words, most if not all of us are easily offended by something or someone at some point.

With this in mind then, how do you react to a key verse in our Gospel lesson today? It reads, “But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about [his teaching], said to them, ‘Does this offend you?’” Let’s start there. After I read our Gospel lesson today, who was offended. (John 6:56-69)? Raise your hand if you are offended. Anyone? No one? This begs a big question then.

When was the last time Jesus offended you? When has he said something that caused you to trip and stumble? Which of his teachings has caused you to think or say, “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?” When have you wanted to turn back from following his way, because it was more than you could swallow? Most of the time people just don’t want to bother to follow Jesus, so they don’t really care what Jesus says, but what about us?

I don’t hear many Christian people today talking about stumbling over Jesus’ teachings, complaining that they are difficult, or being offended by what he says and does. And when I look at my own life, I don’t see myself taking offense at or complaining about Jesus either. Why not? Why aren’t we more offended by Jesus? After all Psychology Today says we are easily offended. Why aren’t we stumbling and struggling to live the gospel more than we are?

The people in today’s gospel are offended. It’s quite a scene before us today. Many of Jesus’ disciples were grumbling and complaining to each other that his teaching was difficult and more than they could accept. “Many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him.” They could no longer stomach his gospel and what it asked of them. The bread of life, it seems, isn’t always sweet.

And it’s not just in today’s gospel that that happens. Remember the rich man who went away grieving, shocked that Jesus told him to sell what he owned, give the money to the poor, and then come follow him (Mark 10:17-22)? Or how about that time Jesus went back to Nazareth and taught in the synagogue “and they took offense at him” (Matthew 13:57; Mark 6:3)? In Luke’s version of that story the people are so angry they want to throw Jesus off the cliff (Luke 4:29).

And there was that time Jesus called the Pharisees hypocrites, and they took offense at him (Matthew 15:1-12). During the Passover meal Jesus told his disciples, “You will all be scandalized, offended, and made to stumble because of me this night” (Matthew 26:31 my translation). We see it in Peter’s denial and Judas’ betrayal but what about us. I don’t think we want to be offended. It might reveal things we don’t want to see or hear. I think most of us work hard not to be offended by Jesus and his gospel. But what if we should be offended?

Maybe the degree to which we are or can be offended by the gospel is the degree to which we believe it to be and experience it as flesh and blood real. Maybe that’s why the people in today’s gospel are grumbling, complaining, and taking offense. They know Jesus isn’t simply talking about bread and wine. He’s talking about a life that is flesh and blood real.

If the gospel is not flesh and blood real, it won’t offend us or cause us to stumble and fall. It asks nothing of us. It’s food out of a box but it’s not the bread of life. It has some nice ideas about how to live, and some feel good verses to memorize, but there is no life within us. It becomes what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called “cheap grace.”

When the gospel gets flesh and blood real, that's when we get offended and angry. Let me give you some examples.

- No one is offended when Jesus tells us to love our neighbor. Love is good news for everyone. It's not offensive until our neighbor is flesh and blood real – someone who looks, acts, and believes differently from us. Then it's a different story.
- Forgiveness is good. It's part of a healthy relationship. I'm in favor of forgiveness, at least in theory. But forgiveness doesn't happen in theory. It happens in the flesh and blood reality of someone who hurt or betrayed us, someone who may not repent or even care, someone who may continue to hurt us. You mean I must forgive even them?
- Jesus said that whatever we do or do not do for the "least of these" we either do or do not do for him. He gives several examples including one about welcoming strangers. (Matthew 25:35, 43). We are to welcome the stranger as Jesus. Jesus is in every stranger, every needy person. That's beautiful until it is flesh and blood real, until the stranger is a migrant at our border, in our town, on our property. Then what do we do?
- We love the cross of Jesus. We wear it, hang it on our walls, and decorate with it. It reminds us of how much Jesus loves us. We follow his way of the cross. We know that means denying ourselves, taking up our cross, and following him. But what happens when we're asked to give up our individual autonomy or change an aspect of our life for the well-being of someone else? That's when the cross becomes flesh and blood real.

If loving, forgiving, welcoming, and taking up our cross – and a thousand other things Jesus taught and did – do not offend and challenge us, cause us to look at how we are living, make us reconsider our beliefs and actions, then maybe the gospel just isn't flesh and blood real for us. Maybe we've disembodied the gospel and separated the Word from everyday flesh. And if the gospel is not flesh and blood real, then what difference does it make? Why are we here today?

I want us to live a gospel that is flesh and blood real. I want us to be offended by it. I hope the gospel never loses its power to offend. And I hope you and I never lose our capacity to be offended.

Here's why I say that. Every time the gospel offends us, we have bumped up against a limitation in our life. When the gospel is offensive it's showing us something about ourselves. It's revealing the limits of our love, forgiveness, welcome; the limits of our justice, peacemaking, compassion; the limits of our life and humanity. And it's pointing the way to new life and more life.

What if we should be offended by Jesus and the gospel? What if our offense at the gospel is not a failure but an opportunity for "life and life abundant" (John 10:10)? What if what offends us is opening a door to new life and calling us to grow and change? What if each limitation against which we bump is a starting line and not the end of the line?

"Do you also wish to go away?" That's the question Jesus asked the offended disciples. It's the question we face every time we are offended and bump up against our limitations.

Sunday August 25<sup>th</sup>, 2024

It's the question we face every time the situation is difficult, messy, unclear, and asks more of us than we want to give.

Sometimes the answer is yes. Sometimes we turn back, and we defend ourselves rather than let ourselves be offended. Other times, however, we trust that the very person or situation that offends us has "the words of eternal life."

Which is it for you and me today?