

## **John 6:52-58 “Watch Out for Cannibals”**

We've all been misjudged haven't we? Sometimes it seems we're misjudged on a daily basis. People make unwarranted assumptions about us for all sorts of reasons. “Oh, you live in *that* neighborhood. You must be one of those snobby rich folks because that's just the way people who live there are.” Or, “Oh. You live in that neighborhood. You must be some sort of criminal or drug dealer.” “What? You listen to that kind of music? You must be some boot-stompin' redneck hillbilly.” “What ... you read that magazine? You must be some sort of bleeding heart snowflake.” “You have tattoos? What ... you had some wild oats to sow. You probably regret those, huh? Are you going to have them removed?” Or, “You wear those clothes? What ... do you think you're some kind of lumberjack or something?” There's “Are you kidding? You like that kind of food? Are you trying to be Japanese or something?” “You drive that car? What, an American car isn't good enough for you? You think Germans make better cars? Your grand-daddy died in a war so you wouldn't *have* to drive a German car.”

Assumptions and misjudgment goes beyond appearances too. Sometimes we're misjudged for our actions. “Oh, you voted for so-and-so ... that must mean that you're tied to a particular political party and that you always fall in line with that party's agenda.” “You like true crime novels? That's so creepy. Do you read them so you can figure out how to kill people and not get caught?” “You take boxing lessons? What, did you get bullied as a kid? I guess you need an outlet for your violent tendencies.” People think they know all about you because of one aspect of your life, but that's not true is it? Even if someone is wearing a “John Deere” t-shirt, you can't assume that they're a farmer. They may just have a John Deere riding mower. Or maybe they don't. Maybe they live in New York City and have a friend or relative who works for John Deere and they had some leftover merchandise

to give out. You needed a t-shirt, and the only clean one in the drawer was the John Deere shirt. You can't assume anything. And yet that's what we often do. We make assumptions based on appearances. We assume people's intentions. We assume people's motives. We assume people's backgrounds. We assume their values ... their beliefs. And we may feel upset when someone does it to us, but then we'll turn right around and do it to someone else without even knowing we're doing it. To some degree, I'm doing it right here and now as I speak!

Here's another question for you: Have you ever been misunderstood because of your religion? We do that a lot in our culture. People treat us differently when they find out about our religion. I have a guy that I run into quite often who says, "Well there's Pastor Jesse. Been out saving souls today?" And I want to say, "If you knew the first thing about my work, my faith and the way I practice it, you'd know that saving souls isn't *my* job, it's God's!" While we're on the subject, I want to do a little plug for something that Chico Area Interfaith Council is doing this month. We're having a dessert in K-Hall on the evening of October 18th called, "What You Don't Understand About My Faith." We want to start some conversation about what it feels like to be misjudged because of your religion. We've invited four panelists from traditions that are often unfairly stereotyped and judged. We've got someone from the Christian Science tradition who is probably tired of being asked, "Oh, aren't you the people who don't believe in doctors?" We've got someone from the Baha'i faith who probably gets flack from people who thinks he belongs to "some new-age cult." We even have someone representing pagan traditions who will likely be addressing the myth that "all pagans practice witchcraft." And then we'll have someone from the Muslim faith who I know for sure encounters people who think that the words "Islam" and "terrorist" are interchangeable. So please come to that. Thursday, October 18th, 7:00 right here in K-Hall. Having said all that, I want to acknowledge that Christians

are often misunderstood too. People make so many assumptions about how we vote, how we dress, how we worship, how we treat each other, how we manage our resources, how we parent our children, how we deal with science, technology, life, death, birth, prayer, free will, choice, heaven, hell ... so many assumptions. And to complicate matters, most of these assumptions are based on what folks see on TV or the news. Remember that the media doesn't always put the best examples of any particular group in front of a camera. They usually go after the ones who are most entertaining instead.

The earliest followers of Jesus dealt with unfair assumptions too. "Oh, you follow Jesus. You must be one of those hicks from up north in Nazareth." And some of the disciples may have had to say something like, "Well yes, some of us are from up north, but not all of us. Jesus picks up followers from all over the place." "Oh, that Jesus. He hates all Pharisees." No, there are a lot of Pharisees that he appreciates like Nicodemus over there. Jesus just has problems with the clueless ones who've traded their religious core values for the power and creature comforts Rome gives them. Here's one that you may or may not know about. In the second century, the rumor started circulating around that Christians were cannibals. Where in the world would people get this idea? Well, they were always talking about eating the body and drinking the blood of their dead leader. What? That's not true! We don't *literally* eat his body or drink his blood! We eat bread and drink wine to remember Jesus' broken body and spilled blood when we was arrested, beaten and crucified by the Romans and the Jewish Sanhedrin. So you admit it! "Admit what?" "Don't some of you believe that when the bread and cup are blessed, it actually becomes the body and blood of Christ?" Well when you put it that way .... "Cannibals!! You're all cannibals." See how frustrating it becomes? Then you have to say things like, "What you're talking about is something called 'transubstantiation,' and there's no

simple way to describe what that means, *plus* not everyone who follows Jesus believes in this doctrine of transubstantiation!

But the person who's making the assumption that all Christians are cannibals? They tuned you out the second you used a \$200 word like "transubstantiation." Because they *know* about cannibals. There were practicing cannibals outside and inside the borders of the Roman Empire. There were primitive tribes who believed that by eating the flesh and drinking the blood of their dead leaders, they would somehow gain the deceased's qualities, strengths, and wisdom. So it's not a big surprise when early church historians like Origen and Tertullian wrote about how people outside the church's circle thought Christians were cannibals. Even if folks outside the church understood that these Christians were just eating bread and wine, the mentality seemed similar to those primitive people. Sort of like, "We want to be more like Jesus, so we pretend that we're eating his flesh and drinking his blood." Ooooooh. Now wait a minute. That's hitting a little too close to home here. When you frame it like that, I have to ask, "*Am* I thinking like a cannibal here?" I mean, some people say that I follow a zombie because Jesus rose from the dead. But yeah, I do want to be more like Jesus, and I do participate in the Lord's Supper. In fact, it's the last thing we do in church before the pastor sends us out the door saying, "Now go be like Jesus!"

I want to propose something today that one of our most celebrated historians in the Disciples of Christ church, Joey Jeter, threw out in a 1996 communion meditation. He said, "In spite of our protestations to the contrary, maybe we *are* cannibals." He says, "Think about it. We humans seem to be the devourers of all good things. We devour the planet. We devour each other. We would devour God if we could. And the truth is, we humans devoured the Son of God in death on a cross 2,000 years ago. Thankfully, God's love, which always meets us at our worst with mercy, did not abandon us for sadistically murdering God's son, Jesus. Jesus who

in his final meal with his disciples said, “Here. This is my body. You work out your issues ... you work out what you need to work out on this. Meanwhile I’ll continue to love you. As the old hymn goes, “What wondrous love is this O my soul, O my soul.”

Today when we share the emblems of this sacred meal with our brothers and sisters world-wide, we are reminded that when we did the very worst thing that we could have done to Jesus and to God ... the very worst ... God and Jesus responded in love. And while I don’t even pretend to understand love that strong, I am very grateful for it, and I am moved to be more loving ... more gracious ... more giving ... more like Jesus ... in return.