

August 16, 2015 – Pentecost 12

The Bread of Life and High Strangeness – Rev Seth Jones ©

Scripture: Proverbs 9:1-9; Ephesians 5:15-20; John 6:51-58

This morning, the Gospel states: *So Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you (6:53).*

Just take a moment and let that phrase strike you, and notice how it strikes you. Does it creep you out? Do you accept it? Has your intellect already done a bunch of background work so you can just take it in?

In any day and age, this statement by Jesus would have been received as a declaration of *high strangeness*. People don't talk like this. People don't tell stories like this. Really, Jesus? Eat your body and drink your blood? What a weird and strange thing to say.

When Kate and I lived in St. Paul, Minnesota, my first real job out of college was in an independent bookstore – Odegard Books on Victoria and Grand. Within weeks of working there, I started coming across very strange material. Stories and ideas of high strangeness would find me; I was not looking for them. Books about UFOs, articles about Bigfoot, weird inventions, strange theories. Rather than resisting, I decided to follow the white rabbit down the rabbit-hole. I became a student of conspiracy theories and came to know very many of them over the course of many years. After a while, I treated conspiracy theories as a study of how we perceive and receive information from the world around us. After the initial glow wore off, I began to not be nearly as concerned about whether a particular theory were true or not, but instead what the theory said about the times and culture in which we were living.

Crop circles figured large in my research. Crop circles are large, beautiful designs in wheat fields which appear to be symbolic. For many years, no one had any explanation for them. I collected images of them for a while. Interestingly, even after two men came forward in England to confess to making them, the circles kept appearing, each one more elaborate than the next. Even now, they still appear around the world. There are still multiple explanations for them. They are an example of high strangeness.

High strangeness is all around us, if you begin to pay attention for it. One of my favorite *high strangeness* stories are the accounts of the Men in Black. In the early 90s and into the 2000s, there were a series of comedy films starring Will Smith simply titled Men In Black. When the movies came out, I had already done some fair research about

the MiBs. MiBs are visitors who show up, most often, after UFO sightings. Sometimes, it appears by their dress that they are with deep government agencies. Other times, they are so weird that people think they aren't quite human. Their presence, however, goes all the way back to the black plague, way back in the 1300s. Just before the plague would hit a town, there were reports of men in black gowns who were walking through the farm fields outside a town. They would walk through the fields at dusk, and then in the night the plague would strike. Their presence was reported in several locations throughout Europe. They are personages of very high strangeness.

I read a story about a woman who met with a very good friend in downtown Chicago about 20 years ago. They went downtown, just outside the loop and found a restaurant, intriguingly named Restaurant X<sup>1</sup>, in a beautiful building. The restaurant was ornate and immaculate. The service was exceptional and the food delicious. When they paid and left about 3 hours later, it occurred to the friends that they had been the only people in the restaurant, which seemed strange. The experience was made even stranger when the friends invited other friends to go to the restaurant. When they arrived 4 days later, there was no sign of Restaurant X in the building. Not even a trace – just an empty room. No one in the building knew what the friends were talking about. No indication of a Restaurant X being anywhere in Chicago was even present. What happened there?

What are these events of *high strangeness*? Once you start looking for them, they are everywhere, believe me. I have a working idea about part of what is going on with things like UFOs, Bigfoot, MiBs, and events like Restaurant X. I think when the culture is changing, we begin to lose the ability to perceive things clearly. The categories that allow us to understand certain events are not there, so we create unusual stories to account for things.

When Jesus says such a bizarre thing as “eat my body and drink my blood”, we are right to perceive it as very strange indeed. We do not have the categories to absorb what is being said, or what we are experiencing with Jesus. Cultures perceive the high strangeness differently. The reason this saying is strange to the Jews is not the reason it is strange to the Greeks and it is not the reason it is strange for the Romans.

For the Jews, this is a strange saying because eating the body and drinking the blood is bound up in the responsibilities of the priests in the Temple. The priests make the blood and the meat of the sacrifice holy by creating space for God to sanctify those things. To eat of the body of the sacrificed animal is to partake of the presence of God because the meat has been sanctified by God. To consume, to eat, a sanctified food is to take into oneself the presence of God. So for Jesus to say this about himself is an

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<sup>1</sup> This story was found at <http://www.highstrangenessufo.com/2015/07/welcome-to-restaurant-x.html>, accessed 8/14/15.

intrusion upon what is solely the responsibility of the priests of the Temple, and it is a bizarre heresy. Their culture cannot account for it and so it rings of foolishness.

For the Greeks, eating the body of a god and drinking the blood of a god was common language in the mystery cults of the region. It would be a stumbling block of the highest order for a human being to say *he is* the source of what was previously the realm of the gods. The Greeks had a highly refined sense of the poetic and metaphoric in their philosophy. For the Greek, and for the Hebrew for that matter, to speak of something as *real* would resonate on many levels – the material, the spiritual, the metaphoric. To differentiate between the material reality and the metaphoric truth of a thing would be a mental maneuver they simply would not make. But it was still in the realm of God or gods. For a human to claim that power was highly strange.

And then there are the Romans. Roman culture was highly efficient. They were the epitome of efficient conquest and government, of a highly technical language (Latin) to get things done. And Roman culture was defined by a very strange quality – they had no sense of metaphor. They did not think metaphorically. They were hyper-literalists. If you said to a Roman, “*This conversation is over my head and I cannot grasp it*”, your Roman friend would look over your head and then look at your hand. Roman poetry is highly descriptive and beautiful, but significantly lacking in simile and metaphor. They would never say something like what Romeo says to Juliet: *But soft! What light through yonder window breaks? It is the East and Juliet is the sun! Arise fair sun and kill the envious moon. It is the east, and Juliet is the sun (Romeo and Juliet, by William Shakespeare – Act 2, Part 2)*. How can a person be a sun? How does a sun kill a moon? It would make no sense to the ancient Roman.

To the Romans, the Christians were a highly strange and very unusual cult. Being literalists, the Romans heard this saying by Jesus Christ about eating his body and drinking his blood, and ran with it. The followers of Christ were orgiastic bephrophagists who were interbred to within an inch of colossal stupidity. (A *bephrophagist* is a baby-eater, by the way. Add it to your vocabulary, for parties and to impress your friends). Why would the Romans say this? Because for the literalist Romans, Jesus saying “*Eat my body and drink my blood*” means Jesus’ followers were cannibals. Images of the Virgin Mary holding the baby Jesus had begun to appear in the Roman Christian churches and so they were enacting the eating of the baby Jesus. The orgy claim came from the idea of the “*Holy Kiss*”, which the Romans interpreted to mean sex and lots of it. The interbreeding came from Christ’s followers calling each other ‘*brother*’ and ‘*sister*’.

There is a great piece of writing from about 180 AD, called *The Octavius* by Minicius Felix which gives an account of an argument between a Christian (Octavius)

and a Roman pagan, Caecilius. Here is their conversation<sup>2</sup> regarding the claim of cannibalism:

*CAECILIUS THE PAGAN: You Christians are the worst breed ever to affect the world. You deserve every punishment you can get! Nobody likes you. It would be better if you and your Jesus had never been born. We hear that you are all cannibals--you eat the flesh of your children in your sacred meetings.*

*OCTAVIUS The Christian: That story is probably based on reports that we share together a meal of the body and blood of Christ. That we do. But it is not human flesh we eat. It is bread and wine we consecrate to commemorate our Lord's death. It amazes me you give credibility to these rumors of cannibalism. You know what we're like. Keep in mind that if you have a child and it is a girl but you wanted a boy, or if the child is deformed, or if you simply don't want it, what is done? You leave the child outside, exposed to die.*

*CAECILIUS: You know that it is far more merciful to let the baby die than to bring it up in a home where it is not wanted.*

*OCTAVIUS: We do not expose our children, and you are well aware how so many of the little ones that have been left out to die have been rescued by Christians and given a home. So it's just the opposite of what you accuse us of, Caecilius. We don't consume human life; we rather protect and defend it.*

Here is the conversation regarding the orgy claim:

*CAECILIUS: All right. Granted, it was just a rumor, but we also hear that you meet in secret, even before sunrise, and the gross immorality that we hear goes on in those places is repulsive -- especially the incest.*

*OCTAVIUS: If you came to one of our meetings you would find that the lovemaking and intimacy you are so quick to imagine is of a totally different nature. We meet before sunrise because we are working people. We have jobs to go to. We do not always meet in secret, but we have no temples or synagogues, so we use somebody's home which has enough room. We call one another brother and sister and pledge to love one another because that is what our Lord commanded us to do. And we greet one another and bless one another with a holy kiss, not out of lust but out of genuine love and concern for one another. Come and you will see that we demand the highest standards of morality among all who join us.*

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<sup>2</sup> From <<http://www.christianity.com/church/church-history/timeline/1-300/why-early-christians-were-despised-11629610.html>> accessed 8/13/15

I point out the Romans to you because I think we, as Americans, are most like them in our culture. We are hyper-literalists with a very efficient language. Our ability to engage metaphor is crude and undeveloped. We, as Americans, cannot allow for multiple ideas to exist at the same time in our minds or our culture. And so when we hear Jesus say these words today, many of us are taken aback. We might even reject the entire statement outright.

But remember how Octavius spoke with Caecilius. Octavius spoke with wisdom and clarity. Octavius is a voice of reason in the midst of radical misinterpretation and misunderstanding. Octavius occupies the ground of wisdom; he has learned at the table of Lady Wisdom in Proverbs. Paul says today, *Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is (Eph 5:17)*. Wisdom is discerning the will of the Lord in any given situation.

What is the will of the Lord in Jesus' statement about himself as the Bread of Life? We must work hard to overcome our cultural lenses to see through the high strangeness of Jesus' words to see what is really being said and what is going on. In my Bible, from my first time through seminary, I have written in the margins at this verse in John, "*This is a weird religion*". It is a weird religion. Jesus says weird things. Our Christian friend, Octavius, answers the high strangeness well, however. *We don't consume human life, we consecrate the bread and wine to commemorate the death of our Savior.*

When we, as Proverbs suggests, accept Wisdom's invitation to sit at the table, we will be taught well. The journey into Wisdom's house is a personal willingness to do the rigorous work of engaging the strange aspects of our faith. Entering Wisdom's house means being willing to engage the mystery of resurrection, of Christ's body, of our relationship to this one who both is and is not physically present. Wisdom's house is where we engage the high strangeness of a faith which is defined by a relationship with a person who was once physically present but is now spiritually present in fellowship, food and friendship.

Jesus' pronouncement that those who eat of his body and drink of his blood will have eternal life is highly strange in any cultural context. We need to be willing to ask why it is strange for us. When we accept Wisdom's invitation, we are proclaiming ourselves open to the teaching and guidance of the Holy Spirit. We become, as John Calvin says, 'teachable'. We are able to receive with understanding, wisdom and faith the body and blood of Jesus Christ, the bread of life and the cup of love. This is certainly the way of Wisdom. Paul says in Ephesians that wisdom is, finally, *giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ (Eph 5:21)*.

So let the high strangeness of our faith be present with us. Let the strangeness of our relationship with Christ be the invitation to Wisdom's table, and then let us be

transformed in mind, soul and body by the love of God and Christ for us, in body, mind and soul.

Amen.