

**Good News**  
Confrontation  
*ORDINARY TIME 21 & 22*  
by Paul Turner

Confrontation -- some people thrive on it. Others run from it. Whether or not Jesus liked it, confrontation accompanied him as doggedly as another disciple. Over the next two weeks we hear two stories from two different gospels about two different groups with the same purpose: to oppose Jesus.

Next week (John 6:60-69) we hear the results of the bread of life discourse. Over the last month the lectionary has served us this speech in generous portions. Due to the brevity of Mark's gospel and the importance of this chapter of John, the summer lectionary this year interrupts its sequential presentation of Mark at the miracle of the loaves and inserts the account we conclude next Sunday. This discourse climaxed with a meditation on the real presence of Christ in the eucharist. Jesus revealed the heart of his teaching, the mystery by which his followers could celebrate his continued presence. He shared what was most intimate to his presence, philosophy, and teaching. He took a risk.

The results were not altogether happy. Notably, one group of disciples decided, "This teaching is difficult." They turned back and no longer went about with Jesus. These were not enemies who turned away. Nor was it a group who had never given Jesus a chance. It was disciples. Jesus' own followers split over belief in the true flesh and blood of the Son of Man.

The split probably presaged a similar schism in the early church. Certainly the community for whom this gospel was composed must have known its share of desertions by those who could not accept the teaching of Christ. We still witness such division in our own day. Many find the teaching about the eucharist too difficult to accept.

Disappointment pervades the question Jesus poignantly posed to the disciples who remained: "Do you also wish to go away?" After showing his heart and meeting rejection, he feared the worst.

Into that open wound cut on the heart of Christ Simon Peter poured salve. In the first passage of John's gospel which mentions "the twelve," Peter spoke on their behalf: "Lord, you have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God." This statement parallels the profession of Peter's faith in the other gospels.

Still, as in those passages, the dark cloud of the passion hangs overhead here. "One of you is a devil," Jesus says, speaking of Iscariot who "though one of the twelve" would betray him.

Our sojourn through the sixth chapter of John ends with this discord. Jesus has proclaimed the sublimity of the eucharist. Some of the disciples have deserted him. Others have remained. Peter has professed faith. But the betrayer is at hand.

When we return to Mark's gospel on the following Sunday, things don't get much better. We meet Jesus in confrontation with scribes and Pharisees (Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23.) The mere introduction of these groups sends a shiver down the spine of the reader. Earlier in the gospel, the Pharisees had plotted to kill Jesus (Mark 3:6) and the scribes accused him of expelling demons by another demon (3:22). The appearance of "both" groups of enemies brings a foreboding tension to this passage before it even gets underway.

What provoked this controversy was the avoidance of ritual hand washings by the disciples of Jesus. Mark has to explain this Jewish practice for his Gentile readers, and his scorn for the custom shows through. The scribes and the Pharisees accused them of not observing the law. Jesus countered with a quote from scripture, Isaiah's critique of religious hypocrites who honor God with lips but not with hearts (Isaiah 29:13). He thus accuses his accusers of disobeying the law of God (sincere worship) while observing external human tradition (handwashing).

When a leader carves out a style, you can expect some to follow and others to flee. People will ask questions when their leader's preferences differ from their own. When their perception of the leader changes, they have to decide whether or not to follow.

Often that decision congeals by the means we see here: the written or incarnate Word of God. Jesus overturns legalism in favor of charity, and Peter acknowledges Jesus as the Holy One of God. When controversy threatens religion, charity in the heart and faith on the lips supply succor.

The End.