

## Way Too Literal John 6:51-58

*Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost/15<sup>th</sup> August 2021*

“Step on a crack, break your mother’s back.” The town I grew up in, in Northern New Jersey, was full of old, stately trees that lined the streets, trees originally planted between the streets and the sidewalks. In time, the trees grew, and their roots cracked and uplifted the sidewalk in many places. I remember walking with my mother down one of the streets near my home and hearing her say the rhyme, “Step on a crack, break your mother’s back.” It was said innocently, of course. It became a game. I was careful not to land one of the cracks. Even when my mother wasn’t around, I was careful not to step on a crack. As I look back on that experience, I know there was also a part of me that was fearful and anxious. I took her words literally. How could I not? I was a child. I didn’t want to hurt my mother. I thought something terrible would happen if I stepped on one of those cracks. This memory came to mind thinking about this text.

Jesus says, “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh” (v. 51). The religious leaders listening in on Jesus begin to quarrel amongst themselves and ask, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” (v. 52). They’re both perplexed and scandalized. “So Jesus said to them, ‘Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in him’” (v. 53).

Jesus speaks. The religious leaders respond. Then Jesus speaks again. Jesus says that he is “living bread” and they are confused. Follow the flow of the exchange and it’s pretty clear that they are talking past each other. Jesus is trying to teach them something meaningful, but they don’t get it, they can’t hear it.

Being the consummate teacher, Jesus gives them a metaphor (bread as flesh/flesh as bread) to help them grasp what God is doing through him. The metaphor, like a symbol, helps to reveal the truth. But the religious leaders don’t get it. One would think that as religious leaders they understood how metaphors and symbols operate. Instead, like many religious and non-religious folks, both then and now, they are trapped, enclosed, limited by the literal. And because they are being way too literal here, they miss the deeper meaning of Jesus’ message. And then they get frustrated. And then they become angry and begin to quarrel amongst themselves and then attack the teacher. Sound familiar?

Literalism often hinders us from encountering truth. In fact, literalism has become one of the most insidious sins of our age. That’s what Owen Barfield (1898-1997) believed. English solicitor, non-academic philosopher, and devoted Christian, Barfield wrote an important book titled *Saving the Appearances: A Study of Idolatry*, published in 1965, heralded as one of the top one hundred spiritual works of the twentieth century. Barfield said, “The besetting sin today is the sin of literalism.”<sup>1</sup> Barfield was a close friend of C. S. Lewis (1898-1963). Lewis penned *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe* for Barfield’s daughter, Lucy and wrote *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* for his son, Geoffrey. Stories, as we know, full of metaphors.

What is literalism? Literalism is the belief, the attitude, the assumption, found in certain personality types, that truth can *only* be found in concrete exactness. It's an obsession (and it can be an obsession) with what is actual, real, tangible; it's a strict adherence to the explicit substance of an idea or expression, the exact or literal sense of something, to the "letter of the law." The literalist wants to nail down (sometimes, actually) what is true and then defend it at all costs. Literalism is a way of being and believing that strives to have a tight "hold" on reality. A literalist is often suspicious (even paranoid) of anything that smacks of analogy or metaphor or the symbolic, wary of anything that makes space for what might be implicit, for the possibility of multiple meanings, of plurality. For the literalist there can only be *one* interpretation of a text—for all time. Whether it's a sacred text (such as the Bible or the Koran) or a secular text (such as the U. S. Constitution), there can be only *one* meaning, only *one* way to believe, and only *one* way to be in the world. The literalist will take a metaphor and try to turn it into a thing, an idea, a historic *fact*.

So what's wrong with this? Is it really a sin? There are times when we need to be very literal and factual and exact and concrete, especially if you're an engineer designing a bridge or an airplane. We all want our engineers to be literal and concrete. But when it comes to the faith and spirituality, when it comes to the Bible, which is shot through with metaphor and symbol, if we approach the text and the story too literally there's a good chance that we will miss the message of the gospel altogether. This is why it's a kind of sin because literalism separates us from the truth, it separates us from the gospel, and separates us from God.

Literalism hardens our hearts and impedes our imaginations from encountering afresh God's presence in the world.<sup>2</sup> It walls us off from mystery. It narrows by making the multiple into one; multiple meanings, multiple definitions, and multiple interpretations are reduced to one, monolithic meaning. Not surprisingly, there's a link between literalism and authoritarian philosophies, theologies, leaders, cultures, and institutions. Literalism abhors the symbolic, the metaphoric, the "as-if" quality of words, of truth, of experience because it can't be nailed down, it can't be easily controlled. Literalism, when taken to its extreme, leads to fundamentalisms of all varieties, which has to do with texts, with words and the meaning of words and ultimately about control and authority. We see this in fights over how the Bible or the Koran should be interpreted, which then leads to conflicts over power, ethics, morality, and competing worldviews.

We often think that a literal meaning of something is closer to the truth. We don't put enough stock in the importance of metaphors or symbols. We like to say that something is "only" a metaphor or that it is "just" a symbol, thus dismissing their power to convey the truth. However, ironically, an obsession with the literal blocks what can be known, obstructs our relation to mystery, and thus hinders the possibility of discovering what can be known and experiencing something new. As a result, a lot of the truth contained in the Bible is completely missed because people read it literally, instead of metaphorically or symbolically.

My friend James Hollis is on the mark here. He writes, "The sacred is only knowable through experience and then made meaningful and communicated by the agencies of metaphor and symbol."<sup>3</sup> The word "symbol," from the Greek, *symbolon*, means to throw together. Ideas, images are thrown together into a symbol and a symbol has power because it then points to

something else, something beyond it, which gives it meaning. Think of the cross as symbol. “Metaphor,” from the Greek *metaphora* means to carry over, to bear, to transfer meaning from one place to the other.

Isn't this what Jesus is doing with all these references to bread? Jesus uses a metaphor to make a spiritual claim to help move his hearers from one understanding of himself to another. The metaphor carries us, the metaphor bears us, the metaphor transfers us deeper into our understanding of Jesus. Without the metaphor we take Jesus literally and think we must become cannibals to follow him, literally feeding on his flesh, which, of course, completely misses the point. Some segments of Roman society accused the first follows of Jesus as cannibals, eating flesh and drinking blood, thus completely missing the point of the Eucharist.<sup>4</sup>

Metaphor allows us to go deep, to have a more profound meaning of something, to discover what is not obviously available on the surface. In many respects, we can view the entire life of Jesus an enormous metaphor or symbol who carries and transfers meaning from God to all of us.

Still, it's easy to see why literalism is so dangerous and why the Church and the world are suffering, terribly, from it. The literalist bent undergirds and stands behind the many expressions of fundamentalism (religious and otherwise) unleashing its toxic effluence throughout the public square and the Church. Consider what is transpiring in Afghanistan this morning as the Taliban takes cover the country and now approaches Kabul.

The unmitigated fact is that reality is infinitely more complicated and complex than fundamentalists will acknowledge, more than they are free to admit. Literalism and fundamentalism are a form of bondage and, therefore, are the opposite of freedom. They are defensive reactions against the ever-increasing intricacies and challenges of the contemporary world and the bane of civilization itself. Fundamentalism, along with its bedfellows literalism and authoritarianism, are inflicting untold damage upon the world of religious faith, the very faith they say they care most about and try to defend and preserve.

So what do we do? How do we reclaim the importance of metaphor and symbol? We could take our cue from New Testament scholar John Dominic Crossan, who characterized his scholarship this way: “My point is not that those ancient people told literal stories and we are now smart enough to take them symbolically, but that they told them symbolically and we are now dumb enough to take them literally. They knew what they were doing; we don't.”<sup>5</sup>

What do we do? How do we move beyond this impasse? Perhaps the only way out is through. We need to face the devil himself (not literally, of course, metaphorically). We need an exorcism to free us these alien and destructive powers. Maybe we need to be healed. Jim Hollis, whose insights and wisdom I respect enormously, argues that literalism is a kind of psychopathology in need of deep healing (or we could say, theologically, redemption). From decades of work as a Jungian psychoanalyst, Jim says a way to gauge mental health and emotional maturity is the degree to which one can tolerate what he calls the triple A's: ambiguity, ambivalence, and anxiety.<sup>6</sup> The ability to hold these in tension—and not escape into literalism and fundamentalism and other strategies of avoidance (such as addiction)—is a way to assess one's psychic strength. I can certainly resonate with this. The literalists (of all varieties) I

have known and know—and *love*—and who at times try my patience, have difficulty tolerating ambiguity, ambivalence, and anxiety—and sometimes for *very* good reasons. They often use their beliefs or relationships to a text or their political ideologies to bolster themselves against a perceived threat, to protect their fearful egos from attack or assault, to wall themselves off from the ambiguity, ambivalence, and anxiety that come with the human condition.

So what do we do? Like every sin, confession is good for the soul. Forgiveness and healing are possible. Perhaps therapy is in order. The struggle is real and serious. The pushback from literalists is strong. Several years ago, I wrote a short article about the [threat of literalism](#) and I became the topic of several fundamentalist websites that took me to task and questioned my faith.<sup>7</sup>

Jesus offers us bread; he offers himself *as* bread; he offers himself *as-if* he were bread. He offers us a metaphor. He gave us so many metaphors of himself. We're invited to play with them, imaginatively engage them, relate to them, feed on them, hold them, gently, not too tightly, learn from them. Metaphor is a gift, given to help us apprehend the life of Jesus who comes that we might have life abundant. These metaphors and symbols help us fathom the depths and meaning his life, they help us to take in and digest all that he wants to show us and teach us about the mystery that is God, to help relate to the mystery that is God—instead of trying to define the mystery, define God, define Jesus, or try to nail him down. How we love to crucify our metaphors. “Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his drink, you have no life in him” (John 6:53).

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<sup>1</sup> Owen Barfield, *Saving the Appearances: A Study of Idolatry* (Wesleyan, 1988).

<sup>2</sup> James Hillman, *Re-Visioning Psychology* (Harper & Row, 1975), 149. “Literalism prevents mystery by narrowing the multiple ambiguity of meanings into one definition. Literalism is the natural concomitant of monotheistic consciousness—whether in theology or science—which demands singleness of meaning.” Owen Barfield’s contemporary classicist scholar Norman O. Brown (1913-2000), who also warned about the dangers of literalism, believed, “The thing to be abolished is literalism.” Brown insisted the “alternative to literalism is mystery.” Norman O. Brown in a response to Herbert Marcuse (1898-1979) in his *Negations* (London, 1968), cited in Hillman, 149.

<sup>3</sup> James Hollis, *The Archetypal Imagination* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2000), 42.

<sup>4</sup> Justin Martyr, in 150 A.D., makes the earliest reference to this misunderstanding Daniel B. Clendennin, “Were the First Christians Cannibals? ‘Eat My Flesh, Drink My Blood,’” *Journey with Jesus*, <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/Essays/20120820JJ.shtml>.

<sup>5</sup> John Dominic Cross, *Who is Jesus?* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007) 31, cited in David Tacey, *Religion as Metaphor: Beyond Literal Belief* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2015), 16. Literary critic and theorist Northrop Frye (1912-1999), one of the towering intellectuals of the twentieth century, said, “When the Bible is historically accurate, it is only accidentally so: reporting was not of the slightest interest to its writers. They had a story to tell which could only be told by myth and metaphor: what they wrote became a source of vision rather than doctrine. The Bible is, with unimportant exceptions, written in the literary language of myth and metaphor.” Northrop Frye, *Words with Power* (Ontario: Viking, 1990), xiv, cited in Tacey, 17.

<sup>6</sup> Hollis, 63

<sup>7</sup> Kenneth E. Kovacs, “The Threat of Literalism,” *Medium*, July 30, 2017, <https://kennethkovacs.medium.com/the-threat-of-literalism-735601f98596>.