Sermon Aug 26, 2018

Tell Me You Didn’t Say That!

John 6:56-69

It’s been almost 58 years since the famous Kennedy-Nixon debates that highlighted the 1960 presidential election. Since there’s enough partisan rhetoric going on all around us, this fact is not mentioned to arouse ancient political passions — although it is worth mentioning for anyone who gets carried away by the events of our day that historians are still sorting out the lives of Kennedy and Nixon, both of whom ultimately served as president.

The event took place when television was a new medium. People were still learning the rules and coming to understand how it would change politics — as well as everything else! The first debate took place on September 26, 1960. Others followed on October 7, 13 and 21. All were important, but the first had the greatest impact.

**GRAPHIC: Kennedy, who had been campaigning in California, looked tanned and fit by all accounts. Nixon had lost 20 pounds while spending two weeks in a hospital after injuring his knee.** He arrived wearing an ill-fitting shirt, with a 5 o’clock shadow, and refused makeup to improve his color.

The result was that the majority of those who listened to the debate on the radio thought Nixon won, but the majority of the 70 million Americans who watched the debate on television thought Kennedy, who appeared youthful and energetic, won. A few weeks later, he won one of the closest elections ever.

We’ll leave it to the historians to argue about the legacy of both men, but certainly in the six decades since, we’ve seen how important it is for politicians to have advisers make sure they put their best foot forward. Certainly, we can all remember the result when politicians of every party said or did something carelessly!

**A political consultant for Jesus**

All that analysis of an event 62 years ago pales when compared to the scrutiny given to every word and action of Jesus over the past 2,000 years. And reflecting on today’s gospel passage from John, we might think Jesus should have listened to a political consultant.

The chapter begins with the **GRAPHIC: feeding of the multitudes**. This is the one miracle that appears in all four gospels, but in John, Jesus’ incredible actions like this one are not called “miracles.” They’re called “signs” because, like road signs, they are meant to point the way to Jesus. And at least when it comes to people getting fed, that’s a pretty clear sign. They know Jesus is the one who fed them.

But Jesus didn’t get the full political mileage out of this sign because at the time, most of the people getting fed didn’t see the miracle taking place. They just saw the bread. If I were a consultant, I’d stop Jesus before he started and make sure he performed this sign on a high platform, so no one could miss it. What did we start out with? Five loaves? Two fishes? **GRAPHIC: And now we’ve got 12 baskets of leftovers?** This is going in the press release! Everyone ought to know!

Next thing: Yes, Jesus is unhappy the people want to make him king, but at least they get it that he’s the prophet everyone’s been expecting. If he could spend a whole week in a Samaritan village that didn’t help his poll numbers a bit, he could certainly spend a few minutes with his own people who want to treat him royally. Besides, what’s wrong with becoming the king? It’s good to be the king!

Instead, Jesus hightails it out of there. Thank heavens the people follow. They’d like more bread. What’s wrong with that? — isn’t that what kept the Romans happy? So, if I were a political consultant, I would have asked Jesus, “What’s it going to hurt to give the people more bread?”

Then there’s the message that followed. Jesus *argued* with the people. For heaven’s sake, at least they quoted the Bible with all that stuff about their ancestors and the manna. Did he have to remind them that all those people died? That’s off-putting.

And finally, all that stuff about eating flesh and drinking blood. Seriously? Right now, this vampire thing comes and goes, but not necessarily in the circles where Jesus really needs support. Tell me you didn’t say that! **GRAPHIC: Even though I can couch this bread-of-life stuff, so it makes theological sense, it’s still just a little bit nauseating.** Eating flesh and drinking blood? This will confuse some people. We could lose a lot of support with this language. Can’t we save it until after the election?

**GRAPHIC: Is it any wonder that later, at the synagogue at Capernaum, some of his own disciples said, “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?”** In fact, this is a hard teaching for some to accept in this day and age as well.

**Do we get it?**

Of course, there’s one thing wrong with my premise here. It doesn’t matter that he would lose an election for the post of Son of God if the vacancy opened. Jesus is not running for office. Jesus *is*the Son of God. Jesus *is*the Messiah. And the challenge throughout the gospel of John, 2,000 years ago and today, is whether we get it.

**GRAPHIC: Nicodemus didn’t get it at first.** He was stymied by the language about being born again. How was he going to climb back into his mother’s womb? But Jesus did not back down from the language. Ultimately, Nicodemus must have wrestled enough with the words of Jesus to grow into the kind of belief that would not be waylaid, even by Jesus’ death. Near the end of this gospel, Nicodemus, with Joseph of Arimathea, will help with the burial of the Messiah.1

**GRAPHIC: The woman at the well caught on pretty quickly.** Once she figured out the Living Water that never ran dry couldn’t be carried in a bucket but was standing right before her, she ran back to her village, flaws and all, and thanks to her testimony, a whole town of Samaritans believed.2

**GRAPHIC: Ultimately, Martha, the friend of Jesus, got it.** What did she say? “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.”3

**GRAPHIC: And Thomas the Twin, whom we should call Believing Thomas,** not Doubting Thomas, got it. He topped them all with his confession of faith: “My Lord and my God!”4

In today’s passage, we should admire Simon Peter. He doesn’t always come out looking the best, especially in John’s gospel, which is more about the Beloved Disciple, and Lazarus and Mary and Martha down in Judea, rather than the Galilean crew. But when some of the disciples of Jesus “turned back and no longer went about with him,” Simon Peter did not leave with them. **GRAPHIC: Instead, he said, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.”**

**A challenging Gospel**

That eternal life is given to us freely. But who wants it? You are aware it means championing the poor, serving the outcast, touching the sick, visiting prisoners, becoming the hands and face and heart of Christ in the desperate places of the world? Do we really wish to speak the truth to powerful people? Shouldn’t we make the Gospel easier, simpler to follow?

That’s the way of it. Thank heavens — literally! The Gospel is not prettified by consultants. Yes, it is difficult at times. Yes, it is challenging.

Peter put it well. Whether we find the Gospel easy or offensive or even inexplicable at times, **GRAPHIC: there is nowhere else to go. There is no one else to turn to.**

You cannot pin Jesus down. Despite the loss of some disciples, despite the disdain of the powers of the world, despite the tough Gospel that led one follower to betray him, **GRAPHIC: here is the Lamb of God, here is the light of the world, here is the perfect sacrifice, here is the bread of life.**

Going clear back to the first chapter of John, we learned that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. The term for “dwelt” comes from the word which means “pitched his tent.” It is as if John is comparing Jesus to the tent that housed the Ark of the Covenant in the wilderness, the presence of God on the move in the desert.

You can’t pin Jesus down! He is on the move, like that tent of the Presence. Some of the disciples, John tells us, were no longer willing to walk with him. I hope you are. Because regardless of what happens in this nation, in this world, now or in the future, Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world. Jesus has the words of eternal life. Hopefully you have come to believe and know that Jesus is the Holy One of God. Hopefully you have followed the signs that point to Jesus, and despite the challenge of his words, the strength of his presence has led you to say, **GRAPHIC: “My Lord and my God.” There is just Jesus. And he’s all we need.**

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

1 John 19:38-42.

2 John 4:39.

3 John 11:27.

4 John 20:28.

Scripture Reading for Sunday, August 26, 2018

John 6:56-69

56Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.57Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. 58This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever.’ 59He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum.

60 When many of his disciples heard it, they said, ‘This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?’ 61But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, ‘Does this offend you? 62Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? 63It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. 64But among you there are some who do not believe.’ For Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe, and who was the one that would betray him.65And he said, ‘For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father.’

66 Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. 67So Jesus asked the twelve, ‘Do you also wish to go away?’ 68Simon Peter answered him, ‘Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. 69We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.’