

## **“Divine Diet”**

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts  
August 18, 2024 - Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

[1 Kings 2:10-12; 3:3-14; John 6:51-58](#)

Cannibals and atheists: These were but two of the labels given to followers of Christ in the early days of the Christian church.

The atheist label was given to Christians as they refused to worship the gods of their neighbors, and throughout the Roman empire’s neighborhoods, there were many gods to worship, from the imperial deities, such as Jupiter, Mars, Venus; to the gods worshipped locally as people practiced the traditions of their ancestors; to the emperor himself, who, by the end of the first century CE was not only considered to be divine, god on earth, but required his subjects to worship him as such at one of the many temples erected to pay homage to the Caesar. Though living in a society that had many gods to worship, however, Christians recognized Jesus Christ alone as holding divinity and refused to worship Caesar or any others identified as gods. There were some other groups of people who similarly refused to worship Caesar and the Roman and local gods, such as Jewish people, who were given a pass as their religious traditions were considered to be ancient and sacred, but as Christianity, steadily over the course of its first several decades, grew numerically, including, especially, people who were not Jewish, it came to be regarded by imperial leaders as a new religion that was distinct from Judaism, and so Christians were required, like everyone else, to worship the emperor. Those who refused to do so were considered to be dangerous enemies of the empire, which always used violence to maintain control over its subjects, and so many followers of Christ in the first 300 years of the Christian church’s existence followed Jesus in being killed by the state for being a threat to its security.

And it wasn’t just the imperial powers who considered Christians to be a threat to the people’s well-being as the neighbors of Christians feared that their lack of devotion to the gods would lead the under-worshipped deities to become angry and to unleash their wrath against everyone. So many who saw non-worshipping Christians as being a threat to the common enjoyment of peace and prosperity labeled them as dangerous atheists.

They were also reviled as cannibals as Christians regularly met and consumed together in their meetings the body of Christ. Their celebration of communion was, of course, a symbolic gesture, as they remembered the life of Jesus, especially his way of self-sacrificing love, and consumed his teachings and his ways as food to nourish their souls and to unite them in the common purpose of continuing Jesus' work in the world as his living body. But to those who were not followers of the way of Christ, who already considered them to be an atheistic threat, the religious ritual of communion resembled cannibalism and was just one more reason to fear and shun Christians.

Now I am biased as a Christian minister, but I do not consider myself or you to be dangerously godless or scarily cannibalistic or to otherwise threaten the peace or prosperity of our society. I believe quite the opposite, in fact.

Truly, we are called not to worship the gods of this world, whether they are gods of stone or wood, powerful people, ourselves, or anything made by people, including money, fame, or material prosperity. And we are called to turn from the traditions of our world, even those of our families or ancestors, that are exalted above our devotion to Christ.

Just as King Solomon, who used to worship the many gods of his ancestors and neighbors, offering incense and animals to them at what our first scripture lesson from 1 Kings calls the high places, meaning mountaintop shrines or other places for worshipping the gods, turned from this practice when receiving the gift of wisdom from the one true God of Israel, we are called to wisely turn away from worshipping the human-created gods of this world to worship instead the eternal Creator of all.

We are called here to worship God as we take in God's wisdom through following the one who was the embodiment of God's wisdom, Jesus Christ, who gave us his life and his way of living that God's wisdom would feed us and help us to grow and flourish. And we are called to worship God by putting the wise way of God as revealed in the loving, life-giving ways of Christ into action so that the world would be blessed with the wisdom of holy love.

This wisdom of God is needed in our world now as much as ever. For we are still godlessly, cannibalistically consuming one another throughout the world. Our adoration of stuff, including the possessions of our neighbors, leads us to make

war on one another. Our love of power over others leads us to all kinds of destructive behaviors as we seek to be enriched by others or coerce others into becoming what we desire them to be rather than choosing to live peacefully with them just as they are.

Here, however, dear friends, we are called to turn from worshipping these ancient, destructive gods, and we are called instead to worship Christ, the servant of all, and to take in his wise way of loving service, which gives us life that is abundant and imperishable.

We gather each Sunday to be reminded of this calling to feast on the divine diet of God's wise ways of love so that we might go out from this place to feed others with the abundant blessings we enjoy. So let us always go and feed people with the divine diet of love as we have been fed. Let us continue to feed bodies, as we do through the food pantry and community dinners, and to nourish spirits, as we do through our VBB program for kids and the work of the Purpose School, our music ministries, and all of our other programs and activities through which our spirits are lifted. And let us expand our giving to one another and the world around us by choosing to live more peaceably with one another and our neighbors, making this house of worship more of a lofty place of extravagant welcome. As we live in love, following the wise ways of Christ, may more of God's love live in us, transform us, and give us God's peace. Amen.