

The Hunters are Among Us!

The Water Cannibals

Columbus and the Conquistadors had a problem. Their main objective in the West Indies was to procure as much gold as possible. The project was going quite well when Queen Isabella decided the Indians should *not* be enslaved. Oh, they could still be forced to work for no wages. Isabella was not so unreasonable as to deny this privilege. In the spirit of Christian love, the Indians could be worked in the gold mines sixteen hours a day, six days a week, with Sundays off to farm and provide food for the Conquistadors. The Indians could be worked until they starved to death or until they were so weak from hunger that disease took them. Their hands and feet and noses could be cut off if they failed to produce enough gold from the earth to fill the Conquistadors' ships or enough sweet potatoes to fill the Conquistadors' bellies. But the Indians could not be enslaved. They could not, themselves, be claimed as property and removed from their home island to work on some other.

The problem was, not all the islands had gold, and on those islands that did have gold, for unknown reasons, the Native populations were quickly dwindling away to nothing! A larger disposable work force was desperately needed. The shrewd Conquistadors said something like this to Isabella, "Your Majesty, while the Arawakan Indians are peaceable folk, it is reported and we tend to believe that the Caribs are eaters of human flesh." Isabella, predictably outraged, decreed that from that time forward, the Carib people could and should be pursued, enslaved and removed to other islands or even brought to Spain for sale.

So began the stereotype of cannibalism among American Indian people. The very word "cannibal" is rooted in a mispronunciation of the word "Carib." From the time of Queen Isabella's decree, the Conquistadors were careful to explore for gold on any "newly discovered" island *before* deciding whether the inhabitants were peaceful Arawakans or "cannibalistic" Caribs. If gold was found, the people were declared to be Arawakan and set to work mining. If no gold was found, the people were declared to be Caribs, enslaved and taken elsewhere. Funny thing: The Caribs say their people never were cannibals.

We Cherokees, just as most all Indians and other people worldwide, have a healthy horror of cannibalism. In our old stories, cannibals are always either terrible monsters or evil spirits.

The Water Cannibals are spirit people who live in a land below the rivers. They come up from the rivers to do their hunting in the early morning hours. Just after sunrise, they search from house to house, looking for those who may still be asleep. If one is found still in bed, they shoot that one with arrows, carrying the body away. A shade or changeling is left in place of each victim, so the family is not aware their loved one is lost. The changeling looks and talks just as the person it replaced, yet there is no real life in it. Within seven days the changeling fades and dies.

So, for a long time, the Cherokee people didn't know about the Water Cannibals. Then there was a certain Cherokee man who became very sick and seemed not likely to recover. The doctors, his family and friends all gave up on him. The man was alone in the house one morning, unable to get out of bed, when an old woman came in. She looked just like an ordinary Cherokee woman, but the man didn't know her. She said, "It looks like your friends have left you here to die. Come with me and I'll help you get well." Surprisingly, the man was able to rise from his bed to follow the woman who led him away from town and down to the river. When they came to the river's edge, the woman kept walking, and the man followed. Surprised, the man found himself on a road beneath the water, and he wasn't even wet!

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Soon, they came to a town with many fine houses. Children were playing. Women were going about their work. The man watched a group of hunters pass along the road, but instead of deer or bear, they were carrying the bodies of men, women and children tied hand and foot to poles balanced on the hunters' shoulders. The man was horrified to recognize several of his friends and relatives among the dead. Finally, they stopped at a house. The woman said, "This is where I live." They went inside. The man was very tired and lay down on a bed. The woman said, "You must be hungry. I'll fix you something to eat. *What do you think she was going to fix for him?* She went to the door and beckoned to the hunters, who brought in one of the bodies. The old woman was about to cut a roast to fix for the man's breakfast, when she saw the terrified look on his face. "I see," she said. "You can't eat our food." The old woman fixed the man some beans and bread and afterward took him back home, cautioning him not to speak to anyone for seven days.

Seven days later, the man told his story. After that and right up until nearly modern times, Cherokees were careful not to stay in bed past sunrise. In the old days, lazy children were often awakened with cries of, "Up! Up! The hunters are among you!"

Love Does not Include Biting and Devouring

It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.

You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature, rather, serve one another in love. The entire law is summed up in a single command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other. So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law.

- Galatians 5:1, 13-18

Another Cannibal Story

As a four-year-old child, I had a recurring dream. In the dream I was running hand-in-hand with my daddy through a darkened, big-city department store, late at night. We were running for our lives, chased by cannibals. These cannibals were not dusky hunters from the Congo River Basin, nor were they feathered warriors from New Guinea. These cannibals were a well-respected white family from our church.

My daddy held tight to my hand, pulling me along. We ran up a stalled escalator and were finally cornered by a railing in an upper level of the store. As the cannibals drew in closer, we turned and leaped over the railing into the darkness.

I had this dream four times, and to this day, I can remember it as clearly as that first night when I awoke crying and screaming, "Mommy! Mommy!" Since I was four-years-old, I've always been wary of cannibals, and have watched for them in places others might not think of looking, such as in church, at school, or even in department stores.

Galatia was in the middle of the country we now call Turkey. The Galatians were a unique people within that Mediterranean world. They were more closely related to the people up in what would be France and the British Isles. They were noted for being big, red-headed, freckle-faced people, and you can still find red-headed people in central Turkey. Of course, the Galatian culture was very different from the cultures of the Greek people and the Jewish people and others in that region. Most of these thought of the Galatians as barbarians or savages. They were considered very warlike and it was said they practiced ritual cannibalism. The same was said of First-Century Christians, by the way: that *they* practiced ritual cannibalism, the difference

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being that no one believes *that* story anymore. Of course, it wasn't called cannibalism in the First Century. Back then they called it, "Biting and devouring each other."

I'm sure Paul knew all about that before he wrote this letter to the Galatian followers of Jesus. He had lived among the Galatians, after all. Paul came to Galatia, told the story of Jesus and left, trusting Creator himself to continue what he had already begun in these people: the birthing of a truly Galatian expression of the Jesus Way.

After Paul left Galatia, others came. These others were people who considered their own culture and way of doing things to be more God-blessed than anything within the Galatian culture could possibly be. A great many of the Galatians started believing these new teachers, and the trouble began. They were saying, "You've got to do things this way, not that way. You've got to worship on this day, not that day. You've got to eat this and stop eating that. You've got to make this one particular tribal cut or mutilation on your body and not any other.

Paul wrote them a letter. He could not have been more angry. Read the entire first chapter of Galatians sometime. As soon as Paul gets past the formal pleasantries, he goes to cussing! Read it if you don't believe me. In fact, read the whole letter. It won't take you an hour, and if we all read this letter, it could clear up a lot of the rubbish we Indian followers of Jesus are constantly having to deal with.

What made Paul so hopping mad is something I call Cultural Cannibalism. I first coined that term back in 1996, three years or so before the first Indian Fellowship got started. I never heard it used before then, but as I was reading Galatians 5 one day, it dawned on me that cannibalism is what Paul was talking about.... not literal, flesh-eating cannibalism, but cultural cannibalism, which is probably much worse in the eyes of the Creator who made each culture. Even the Water Cannibals did not sink to the level of cultural cannibalism. Remember, the old woman didn't insist that the Cherokee man eat her food. She respected his ways and escorted him back home.

I define cultural cannibalism as the devouring or assimilation of persons or people from one culture into another, either by force of arms, numbers, rhetoric or other forceful persuasion. Cultural cannibalism occurs whenever one decides to push his/her way on another. Cultural cannibalism springs from a heart of bigotry, which is idolatry: the worship of oneself or of one's culture. The cultural cannibal believes his/her way is best and that he/she has the right, the obligation, the loving responsibility to impose that superior way on the rest of the world.

Now, in my observation, it's religious people who tend to be cultural cannibals. I will go a step further and say that all cultural cannibals are religious people. I'm not thinking narrowly; there are all sorts of religions, not all having to do with church or synagogue, mosque or temple or what not. For some, education is religion, for others it's economics or politics. Even sports and recreation can be religion. The one thing held in common is that whatever the religion, religious people tend to be very devoted to their own particular or peculiar way of thinking, believing or doing things.

It was the religious who were always nipping and biting at Jesus. The Pharisees, the Scribes, the Sadducees: They were the religious people. They were the ones who were always giving Jesus trouble, trying to get Jesus to conform to their way, and when that didn't work, plotting to destroy him.

What did Jesus say?

Be careful.... Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

– Matthew 16:6

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Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the kingdom of heaven in men's faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to.

Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You devour widows' houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. Therefore you will be punished most severely.

Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as you are.

– Matthew 23:13-15

Read that whole chapter sometime, Matthew 23. It's really surprising. I understand that the word for "woe" in the Aramaic language is an imitation of the high-pitched scream an eagle makes before diving down to feed on a dead carcass. The word paints a mental picture of a battle field where one side is totally wiped out, their bodies left unburied. This was one of the strongest Aramaic curse words, a word that could not simply be spoken but had to be screamed, and into English, it gets translated simply as "woe." Just try to figure that one out. The word could be better translated as something like, "You're dead meat! You're nothing but a carcass left on the prairie for all the birds to pick! If you read Matthew 23, you'll see that Jesus is fed up and has a regular cuss fit about the religious folk. That's right; these are the good religious people Jesus is talking about. The religious people wanted nothing to do with Jesus, because he wouldn't play their games. That's what religion amounts to: games, deception, deceiving oneself even more than others, keeping up appearances, saying all the right words, going through all the right motions.

Once Jesus even told the religious people they were children of the devil (John 8:44). The devil is the greatest cannibal spirit of them all, who "prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour" (1 Peter 5:8).

Jesus was never at home among religious people. It was the real people who listened to him and followed him.... people who knew they had some real spiritual needs in their lives.

Now, I have to make a distinction between religion and spirituality, because I believe Jesus made that distinction. Jesus was sitting by a well talking with a Samaritan woman one day, when she started talking religion. Don't get me wrong; the woman was anything but religious. But, here she was talking to a Jewish man, and she knew the big division between the Jews and Samaritans was over religion. "Our fathers worshiped on this mountain," the woman said, "but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem" (Matthew 4:20). Jesus answered, "...A time is coming and has now come when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth" (Matthew 4:23-24).

Jesus was saying, "Be real." Be spiritual, but be real in your spirituality. Spirituality is about relationship, not about rules and regulations and appearances. It's about walking with Creator, not about proving the inerrancy of your particular position.

Real spirituality is about loving your neighbor as yourself.... and that is the exact opposite of cultural cannibalism.

But look, Jesus didn't say, "Be on your guard against the Pharisees." Jesus said, "Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees."

My *second* greatest fear is the fear of being eaten by cannibals. For most of my life, it was my greatest fear, but now my greatest fear is the fear of becoming a cannibal, myself. As scary as cultural cannibals are, the thought of myself becoming a cultural cannibal should and does scare me much more.

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Think of that Cherokee man who went to the world of the Water Cannibals. He was horrified by the realization that he was among cannibals, but what really terrified him was the possibility of he himself becoming one of them.

Watch out for that tendency to become religious and what goes with it: the tendency to impose our own religion on others, eating them alive in the process. Stay real. Stay spiritual. Love you neighbor as yourself. That's all there is.

I need to add this. There is no doubt in my mind that the cannibal dream I had as a four-year-old child was/is a significant communication from the Creator. I didn't know that at the time; I just thought it was a nightmare. Although it is clear to me now that Creator used the memory of this dream to guide me through the years, I had no conscious understanding of the meaning of the dream until I was well into my 30s. I still can't claim to understand it or anything else completely. I'm no Joseph and I tend to be mistrustful of those would-be modern Josephs who toss out dream interpretations more quickly and casually than the waitress bringing your fortune cookie at the Chinese restaurant. I do believe Creator speaks to us through dreams and visions, when and if we are willing to listen. However, in my experience, understanding comes a little at a time, in bits and pieces. But then, I've always been a slow learner.

When I was around 40 years old, I had an appointment to meet with a man in a position of leadership within a certain Christian denomination. The purpose of the meeting had to do with the possibility of establishing some sort of reciprocal relationship between the Indian Fellowships and the churches this man was representing. I awoke that morning feeling very nervous. I had never met this man before. He had said he was interested in what we were doing, but did he really understand what we were doing, what Creator was doing in us, and *why* was he interested? How would he react to me and to what I had to say? Would he relate to me as a fellow human being or would there be that too-familiar condescending air? I got up, dressed quickly and went outside for morning prayers.

At the spot where I go to pray, I just stood there, watching the rising sun, saying nothing. I didn't know what to say, couldn't get to the bottom of what I was feeling, something I had felt so many times before. When I finally did speak, instead of the voice of a 40-year-old man, it was the frightened voice of a 4-year-old child that said, "I'm a scared of cannibals." As all the fear, all the terror of those dark nights long ago came flooding back, I stood there weeping, crying like a little child. But, there was something else, something I had never thought of before, and with the thought, *anger* came raging through the childhood fear. "Where were you?" I screamed to the Creator. "WHERE WERE YOU? Where were you when I was being chased by cannibals? Where were you when I jumped out into the darkness? Where were you? **WHERE WERE YOU?**"

You have heard or maybe felt that voice before, that still, small voice, gentle and soft and patient, the source of which there is no question. Maybe it comes to you often or not so often, but when it comes, it tends to be very sparing of words, and so you listen carefully and remember.

"I was there," the voice said. "I was the one holding your hand, and I was there in the darkness to catch you when you fell."

Remember this: When you feel alone and afraid, Creator is there with you. When you feel as though you are running for your life, pursued by forces that seem completely overwhelming, Creator is holding your hand, not about to let go of his precious child. When, instead of allowing yourself to be devoured, you make that leap of faith into the unknown, Creator is there in the darkness, waiting to catch you. And look, he makes the darkness light.