

Pulp Fiction

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This weather is getting old. But heat wave or no, it is still summer, and all across this great land, there are still millions of people sitting in beach chairs reading bad fiction. Vacuous characters. Predictable plots. Limp and distasteful prose. All perfectly marvelous. Because It's summer! And no matter the signage, in the Summer, trash *is* allowed on the beach.

It is in the spirit of this socially sanctioned consumption of garbage that I now cautiously pull from my beach bag three ideas that most people consider, well... disgusting. They are, in order of ascending offense: eating flesh, drinking blood, and evangelism.

Jesus' instructs his disciples to eat him. Though initially jarring, *our* momentarily jostled imaginations tend to move in fairly short order from (Jeffrey) Dahmer and (Hannibal) Lector to the Book of Common Prayer, and our elegant prayers of eucharistic consecration (including especially for you 8:30 folks, the prayer of humble access. *Grant us therefore gracious Lord, so to eat...*) Some, pricked by the mention of edible bread from heaven, might first visit Charlton Heston, eating manna in the wilderness. Some, former Catholics or students of church history, might think of the doctrinal struggles over transubstantiation and the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. But most of us, I suspect, will end up sitting together, before Leonardo Divinci's long haired Jesus, watching him enjoy a quaint supper with his friends. Do **this** in remembrance of me.

While I have spent my life studying the scriptures and worshipping in the Episcopal church, most of my friends do not celebrate the Eucharist. And so it is with some degree of confidence that I tell you, that when people outside the church here talk of eating flesh and drinking blood, they think of one thing... Vampires.

(Remember we are still under the summer trashy-novel exemption. In the summer, Vampires are allowed on the beach.)

Vampires are all the rage. Those of you with teenage girls in your lives can back me up on this. *Twilight* is a best selling series of fantasy/romance novels that follow the life of Bella Swan, a teenager who finds her life radically changed when she falls in love with a vampire named Edward.

The books have sold over 70 million copies worldwide with translations into 37 languages. The *Twilight* books have set records as the biggest selling novels of 2008 and have spent over 102 weeks on the New York Times Best Seller List.

But wait there is more.

An HBO series, *True Blood*, details the co-existence of vampires and humans in a fictional Louisiana town. The series centers on Sookie Stackhouse, a telepathic bar waitress, who falls in love with a vampire named Bill. This show is also watched by millions, and has won several coveted awards.

My review of these two most prominent manifestations of the current vampire craze leads me to the third concept of my trilogy of summer disquietude--Evangelism. At Baptism, we promise to share our faith by

word and example. Most Episcopalians are comfortable with the example part, but speaking of faith seems verboten.

Well, I think it is high time we *knock that off*, as my grandfather used to say. We have good news to share and it is time. It is time to learn how to share this news with individuals with whom we think we have nothing in common. Teen-age girls, for example, obsessed with vampires.

It is time for us to re-examine our unspoken vow of silence, and reclaim our baptismal vow to speak.

As a church we were explicitly called to this process by the 76th General Convention of the Episcopal Church. Resolution A065 begins, "*Resolved*, the House of Bishops concurring, that the 76th General Convention affirm the Church's teaching that all Christians are called to bear witness to Christ, wherever they may be and to proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ."

Now this seems kind of odd, the Church passing legislation to affirm a Baptismal promise. I think they did it because we don't.

So...vampires. How on earth am I to share the Good News of Jesus Christ with a teenage girl, obsessed with vampires? (And do I have to?) Let me offer one possible starting place for this cross-cultural endeavor. Looking and listening for *why*.

Why do we suppose that so many people are drawn to vampires? Forensic psychology professor Katherine Ramsland offered us this potential clue. "The archetypal vampires are larger-than-life," she says "They can defeat death, seduce anyone of their choosing, obliterate their enemies and stay up all night. What's not to like?"

Setting aside for one moment the slumber party factor, I found this commentary quite helpful in my quest to de-stigmatize and reinvigorate our evangelistic passions... or perhaps to ignite them in the first place. Listen to what she says is drawing people in. "Larger than life, charismatic entities of power and mystery who once were human and now display abilities beyond human limitations." While there is certainly a wide gap between the life death and resurrection of Christ and a blood-sucking, seductive vampire, it is interesting and I think hopeful that *we* actually *know* a person and a place where mystery and power can be safely explored and embraced. *And* our hero also obliterated not only his enemies, but death itself, not by sucking the blood of young girls, but by offering his own blood for their redemption.

Ramsland goes on to identify the allure of the vampire tales for young women in particular: "It taps into the teenage fantasy of being vindicated. She's a supremely average girl who's overlooked, yet Edward notices her. He sees her as something special and unique." And there they are, Mary and Martha and the woman at the well, as Jesus lifts them up with his respect, and then, ultimately by laying down *his* life for their salvation.

So as frightening and offensive as the thought of adding words to our faith witness might be, there is something that I know doesn't intimidate this group, that might help us take some first steps. Puzzles. I think there is a pretty strong penchant for brain teasers in this crowd. And so, I am now officially initiating a culture puzzle throw down.

Here are the rules. When you encounter something you do not understand or find offensive in a particular subculture, write it down. Then ask yourself and research the following questions:

1.) Why do people do this thing? What function does this attitude or activity serve for them? Is it a reaction? Does it appear to be meeting some need(or) or desire(s)? Look into it. What do *they* say are their reasons? what do experts say? What do you think? and then, 2) (most important for the throw down) ask yourself this: Is there something in the Christian tradition that directly addresses that specific concern or need.

And that's it. Your homework for today, which I have assigned in obedience to my ordination vow to support and participate in the councils of this church.

Evangelism is indeed a puzzle-like process. that starts with the intentional discipline of cross-cultural listening.

Last week on Facebook my sister recounted a conversation she had had with her five year old. "Mom," my niece had asked, with an equal measure of curiosity and concern, "Mom, back in the olden times, like before there was Facebook, did you have to use Twitter?"

Your turn. Let me know what you figure out.