

Sermon: August 26, 2018 – John 6: 51-68
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev Greg Wooley

The focus scripture for today's message, is John 6:67-68. In these verses Jesus, watching many people walk away and choose other paths in life, asks the inner circle of twelve disciples if they, too were planning to leave, and Peter answered with these words: "Lord, to whom would we go? You have the words of eternal life."

The words of eternal life. Clearly, in my occupation I like words. Having the opportunity to speak from this pulpit each Sunday is a joy and a privilege, and the process of birthing a sermon each week is a key aspect of my spiritual connection with God. And yet, if all we did was talk about things, without attempting to reach beyond ourselves to bring Christ's love into the community, what good would that be? What we do – the expression of our connection to God's agenda of far-reaching, inclusive love – makes our words of good intention come alive.

And yet the words we speak and the words we give ourselves to, do matter, in and of themselves. Words give shape to our thoughts, they give us something to aim for and, once they have been spoken aloud, give us something to be accountable to. Words can build up or tear down, they can inspire peace or incite hatred. Words spoken when we are wounded or angry can do irreparable damage to relationships, words spoken in love can lift and inspire us to beauty. And, says the apostle Peter, words can even lead us to the realm of eternity.

These words from Peter come at the end of the long and exhausting sixth chapter of John, at a time when the people of Galilee couldn't get enough of Jesus. His healings, his preaching, and in John's gospel, his miraculous displays, were really drawing the crowds. Yet rather than taking advantage of this momentum, and giving the people more of what they were calling for, Jesus starts re-shaping his words in ways that are harder and harder to accept.

He moves from portraying himself (v.35-38) as the bread of life and the bread come down from heaven, to saying (v.51) "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, they will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world," and then caps it off (v.54) with "whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him." And each time his language gets more challenging, more people turn away from him. Admittedly, some of this dialogue sounds a whole lot more like John speaking to the early Christians rather than Jesus speaking to his followers, but the ever-sharpening edge of the dialogue does sound like something that Jesus might do at this critical point of his town-to-town ministry, for he didn't need thousands of hangers-on, followers in name only; he needed a handful of hearty disciples who would listen and learn and do.

So he asks one more question (v.67), this time to the trusted circle of twelve: "You do not want to leave too, do you?" Perhaps stung by the number of people who were falling away from his mission, Jesus takes the risk of alienating even his closest and most important allies. Peter, though, replies (v.68) "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life."

I love those words, and I'm not the only one. Four years ago, my predecessor here at Ralph Connor, Rev. Ron Jeffrey was having a heart to heart conversation with me about life and ministry, and said quite directly that John 6:68 had set the foundation for his practice of ministry and, indeed, his entire life. The words of eternal life, shared by Jesus, express what God needs us to hear in order to truly live. In that conversation with Ron this sacred text came alive for me, and when he and I revisited those words in his final moments one year later, they became embedded in who I am and what I believe about life, and Church, and ministry.

As a follower of Jesus, there is no place else for me to go. But what I find unusual, if we look at where this exchange between Jesus and his disciples falls, is that for most of 71 verses we have been hearing about bread, bread, bread, bread, bread, but when the conversation reaches its climax, Peter talks about words, not bread. Peter's future hopes, it seems, are tied to the words that Jesus has, rather than the bread that Jesus is. And while I, as a "words" guy, am quite happy to hear this, it is a bit of a head-scratcher that Peter - echoing something Jesus says in verse 63 – connects his eternal destiny, to words.

As noted on your bulletin and in the announcement loop, this fall we're going to be doing a cross-border book study, where two Canadian congregations (us here at Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, and the folks at the congregation that Shannon serves in Calgary, Living Spirit United Church) are going to

join with two United Church of Christ congregations in Wisconsin, in studying the same book then connecting up by videoconference to discuss it. The book, by the late Marcus Borg, is entitled *Speaking Christian – why Christian words have lost their meaning, and how they can be restored*. I've just started reviewing this book prior to starting this study, but I already like it and it has something to say to this passage from John.

In his book, Marcus Borg helps me to understand the apostle Peter's reliance on "the words of eternal life" spoken by Jesus. Marcus Borg writes (p.6), "language is the medium through which people participate in their religion. To be part of a religion means being able to speak and understand its language. [But] by 'speaking' I do not mean merely knowing either the ancient languages of these religions or their modern descendants. I mean something more basic: the way practitioners [of a faith perspective] use the concepts and ideas from their religion as a lens through which to see the world, the way they use them to connect their religion to their life in the world".

I ponder this idea for a bit, then think again about what Peter said about Jesus "words of eternal life." It was the words of Jesus that gave Peter and the disciples a lens to see life in a new way. The words of Jesus – parables, sayings, even his confrontational words – helped the disciples to see life from God's vantage point. Whether or not Peter *liked* the increasingly odd words Jesus was using about being bread for the world, he sensed that the words of Jesus showed a new way of being in the world, a way that embodied a God's-eye-view into their daily living. And who else, asked Peter, could give them that? And these same words, two thousand years later, continue to shape us, enliven us, prepare us to be people of a new realm founded in the fullness of God's love.

Powerful words, indeed. But Peter didn't just say, "you have the words that help us live good ethical lives"; Peter said, "you have the words of eternal life." How can that be? How could words possibly have *that* kind of power?

For some help on this, we return to Marcus Borg (pp. 165-166). The "eternal life" spoken of by Jesus' words, is not a different life that only starts after we die. "In John's Gospel" writes Borg, eternal life "is a present experience. The Greek words translated into English as *eternal life* mean 'the life of the age to come.' Within John's theology, this is still future and to be hoped for. But it is also present, something that can be known, experienced now.... To know God and Jesus in the present is to participate already in the life of the age to come. Thus in John", he continues, it "is not about believing a set of statements about Jesus now for the sake of heaven later. It is about loving Jesus and loving God as known in Jesus, in the incarnation, and entering into 'the life of the age to come' now. It is not about people going to hell because they don't believe. It is about the path into life with God now."

Jesus gives Peter, not an invitation to keep in his pocket until some later time when it will gain entrance to heaven. Jesus invites Peter, and us, to understand that we are living in that new time even now. His words of the kingdom, or "kin-dom" of God, reshape our goals and encourage us to live in this new way. And once we have heard these words, we, too, recognize that there is no place else to turn. Jesus, in these words, invites to a life that already participates in God's new reality, a life shaped by a new framework of love and inclusion. Jesus has already placed our feet in eternity; not just as a future hope, but as something to participate in right now when we love unconditionally as God loves us. Yes, we do have great hopes that in death, there is a portal to a more fulsome and everlasting experience of abundant life, but our experience of the eternal realm, glorious and continuous, starts here, now, in Christ.

In his weekly blog ("A different heresy: exploring faith & spirituality in a pluralistic world") Uniting Church in Australia Minister Rev Peter Lockhart brings one more important consideration, as we unravel what Jesus and the apostles were wrestling with. He writes, "From the beginning of John's gospel, John has sought to help his audience to understand that Jesus is the eternal Word of God through whom all things came into being and who, in sharing in our existence, affirms the life that we have received as a gift. We do not have to validate or justify ourselves; we are simply invited to live as we were created to live."

I found this so helpful, for Peter Lockhart reminds us that when we are talking about "words" (plural) or "The Word" (capitalized, singular) in the Gospel of John, we are never just talking about words on a page, or casual words spoken between friends who have no real intent to carry through on what has been said. The gospel of John begins (John 1:1,3,14), "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God...everything came into being through the Word.... The Word became flesh and made his home among us...full of grace and truth." Throughout the gospel of John we keep being

brought back to this idea of the “Word made flesh,” the one who takes the fullness of God’s reality and brings it to life. In the life of Christ, God’s Word is expressed in human ways that we can relate to and, to some small degree, imitate. We wonder how God would express hospitality, and we see it demonstrated as Jesus sits down at table with all manner of outsiders. We wonder how God would relate to racial prejudice, and we hear Jesus tell the parable of the Good Samaritan. We wonder how committed God is to the agenda of boundless love, and we see the cross. In the words of Jesus, and in the Word made Flesh that is Jesus, we have such extraordinary gifts.

We may lament that we live in a time and place where the words of Jesus are not widely understood, and The Word that is Jesus not widely followed. I may be overstating things, but it seems to me that 21st century Church life in Canada very much resembles this scenario in the 6th chapter of John, as the group that aligned themselves with Jesus dwindled. There’s still a faithful core and, in this community of faith a vibrancy that I truly celebrate, but the trend since 1965 has been a gradual walking away from Church participation: in some cases rejecting the words of Jesus, because so many of his followers have shown such narrow, judgmental approaches to the world around them; in other cases, not having any idea of what a Church or Jesus might be about, and not even a faint curiosity about it; or perhaps yearning to be involved with a multi-age group of people who want the world to be a better place, but never imagining that a Church might be that kind of group. But rather than fixating on the hurt feelings that a new generation is not picking up the cause, or worrying about what might happen to those things we love about Church life as our familiar forms fade, I am encouraged by Peter’s confident proclamation, which force me to recommit myself to the words and ways of Jesus.

For I do believe, as my friend Ron did, that in Christ we are shown a remarkable new way of being, which expresses nothing less than the very heart of God. I do believe, as Marcus Borg did, that the promises of eternity aren’t on a time-delay switch that doesn’t click on until we die; Christ invites us to participate in the beginnings of that glorious new day right here, right now. I have no need to think of this as an exclusive path, that excludes the devout of other faiths – I really do see us as many boats on one holy river - but I do believe that in Jesus, the Word made Flesh, I am given everything I need to be reconnected with the Divine and God’s greatest intentions for the world. And I even have confidence that Christ Jesus, in creative ways beyond my understanding, is not yet done with the good folks of the northern hemisphere. I have no certainty in knowing what following Jesus will look like even one generation from now, let alone in the long term, but I do believe that every effort that this congregation makes to invite the community around us into healthy, principled, life-giving relationship with one another, will open doors for new shapes of Christian practice to emerge, and the word of Christ to bring life to a new generation. Some of these new practices may look like what we do on Sunday mornings, or like our Evensong community, or like CYAN or healing pathway or Living into Right Relations, or something totally new may develop. One thing that is for certain, is that the new way will be built not on self-serving, but on engaging the world around us as Jesus did. In the upcoming changes to the way the United Church of Canada structures itself, including the opportunity to set up new and innovative clusters and networks with other communities of faith, I sense a new commitment to step into this new day, fully reliant on the invitational, peace-building words and extravagant, everlasting love of Christ Jesus.

Jesus, who is the Word made flesh; Jesus, who speaks the words that open our eyes to God’s amazing new way in our midst, invites us to that new adventure. My prayer is that our answer to that invitation, and the answer emerging in the generations behind us, will be words spoken in the act of following, as we say “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.” May that eternal realm, already accessible yet still on the horizon, find a home in our words, our deeds, and our life. Amen.

References cited:

Borg, Marcus J.. *Speaking Christian: Why Christian Words Have Lost Their Meaning and Power—And How They Can Be Restored*. SF: HarperOne. Kindle Edition, 2014.

Lockhart, Peter. <http://revplockhart.blogspot.com/2015/08/you-have-words-of-eternal-life.html>

& to read the 2015 Funeral Message for Rev. Ron Jeffrey:
http://www.ralphconnor.ca/downloads/Sermon_RonJeffrey.pdf

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