

Sermon: August 22, 2021 – John 6: 57-69

Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev Greg Wooley

The focus scripture for today is John 6:67-68. In these verses Jesus, watching many people walk away and choose other paths, 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.”

Watch at <https://youtu.be/Gs0fpaPRpyk>

The words of eternal life. Clearly, in my occupation I like words. Having the opportunity to preach 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. As we pick our way through the fourth wave of the pandemic, finding ways that we can safely and faithfully re-engage with that kind of outreach is a key task for us and for all communities of faith.

And yet: even as we acknowledge the importance of Christ-inspired action, 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. 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.” The Church has traditionally heard strong symbolism here for the sacrament of communion, but imagine the response of the first audience hearing this. Jesus’ language keeps accelerating, and each time his language gets more challenging, more people turn away from him.

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 that 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. Seven years ago, my predecessor here at Ralph Connor, Rev. Ron Jeffrey was having a heart-to-heart conversation with me about life and ministry, naming John 6:68 as the scripture passage that had set the foundation for his practice of ministry and, indeed, his understanding of life and life-beyond-life. In that

conversation with Ron this sacred text came alive for me, and when I spoke those words to him one year later, in his final moments, these words 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. I learn from other traditions, I am open to other ways, but with Christ I have a home.

There is a curious point about these words, however: for most of the 6th Chapter of John - 71 dense verses - we have been hearing about bread, bread, bread, bread, and bread, but when the conversation reaches its climax, Peter talks about words, not bread. And while I, as a “words” guy, am quite OK with this transition, it is a bit of a head-scratcher that the writer of John’s gospel, after all that time developing the theme of Jesus as “bread of heaven” would connects our eternal destiny, to words. At the beginning of John’s gospel, Jesus is called “the Word made flesh”, perhaps suggesting a connection between Jesus as THE bread and Jesus as THE word – but Peter talks about words, plural, not “the Word”, singular.

In the fall of 2018, a group from Ralph Connor teamed up via Skype with two United Church of Christ congregations in Wisconsin, in a cross-border book study. The book, by the late Marcus Borg, is entitled *Speaking Christian – why Christian words have lost their meaning, and how they can be restored*. The words of this book help me understand the apostle Peter’s reliance on “the words of eternal life” spoken by Jesus. 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 about the function of words and concepts within our religious lives, 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, healing words, even his confrontational words – helped the disciples to see life from God’s vantage point. Whether or not Peter *liked* the increasingly unusual 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.’ To know God and Jesus in the present is to participate already, in our words and our actions, in the life of the age to come. Thus in John 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, inviting us to a life that already participates in God’s 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.

This July, as many of you know, we had a death in the family. My sister-in-law, a woman of deep Christian faith, went into palliative care and in her last week of this stage of her journey, we were reminded of the power of these “words of eternal life”. Words of her Anglican Deacon surrounded and supported her death; and words of favourite Christian hymns transported all of us, as the transition from this stage of life to the next happened before us. Her actions had spoken volumes during a life of Christian discipleship, and now the words of faith ushered her across the threshold.

That experience of a transition to life-beyond-life brings me back to Peter’s confident proclamation about the words and ways of Jesus. This recent experience with my sister in law, and my experiences with Ron Jeffrey, confirm for me 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. In terms of how this shapes our lives as congregations, I do not know what mainline Christianity will look like in Canada even one generation from now, let alone in the long term, but I do believe that every effort that a congregation makes to invite the community around us into healthy, principled, accountable, life-giving relationship, will open doors for new shapes of Christian practice. The new ways, going forward, will be built on engaging the world around us as Jesus did, reliant on the invitational, peace-building words and extravagant, everlasting love of Christ Jesus.

Jesus, the Word made flesh; Jesus, the one who speaks the words that open our eyes to God’s amazing new way in our midst, invites us to new adventures. 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, present and future, find a home in our words, our deeds, and our lives. 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, 2011.

& to read the 2015 Funeral Message for Rev. Ron Jeffrey:

http://www.ralphconnor.ca/downloads/Sermon_RonJeffrey.pdf

© 2021 Rev Greg Wooley, Ralph Connor Memorial United Church.