

Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church

Sermon

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Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church
1225 Piper Boulevard, Naples, FL 34110

Who Has the Words of Eternal Life?

John 6:56-69

It was crisis time in Jesus' ministry. Until now everything had been going great. People were flocking to him from every place. A large number of disciples followed him around. Then he said this: Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. This is the bread that came down from heaven, meaning he had come from heaven, the divine power enfleshed in a human body.

That specific claim scared people off. The very thought of God becoming human, mixing it up in human affairs, getting down and dirty with sinners, even eating with them, frightened them. The very idea that the disciples should feed on Jesus, to digest his every word, to become one with him, as God had become one with him...well that was too much. So people began to leave. Their leaving reached such a crisis that Jesus asked the twelve, "Do you also wish to go away?" That's when Peter confessed that Jesus was the Christ. "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."

You and I also believe that Jesus is the Holy One of God. But what does that mean for us? What does that mean for our hopes, our dreams? What does it mean for the way we live and love and have our being? Will we hear Jesus' challenging words and turn away? Or will we agree with the disciples that Jesus has the words of eternal life? And just what is eternal life? Is it only the hope of life after we die? Or is it also a way of living now, a way of life that feasts with Jesus, that rubs elbows with him at the table, that chows down on the food and drink he provides, that seeks to live as he lived, and picks up a cross to follow him?

Al Winn, president of Louisville Seminary my first year there, noted the decline in church membership during the 70's, a decline that has continued to this day. He explained it this way, a bit overly simple, but strikingly accurate. During the 50's he said, the church sold the people a bill of goods: sweet Jesus, meek and mild. During the 60's the church followed Jesus into the streets, into the marketplaces and the halls of power. The church marched for justice and right relationships among people, which shook people up. So during the 70's people began to leave the church. They wanted sweet Jesus back, not the Jesus who so challenged them to change.

So what is it about the work of God that offends people? Or is it just the church misrepresents him? What is it about the ministry of Jesus that upsets people so? Or more directly to the point, do you, do we, also wish to go away? Do you want to leave with the rest or do you know what Peter knew, that Jesus has the words of eternal life?

Nobody can say for sure just what God is doing these days, but I know where to look for God's instruction to us who have been called to new life in him. I am quite confident that God's spirit is mixing it up in our local, national and world communities, bringing transformation. Jesus called it the kingdom of God coming near. I further believe, that God is calling us to be involved in that transformation, to feast on Jesus, to learn from him and draw strength from him. God has laid out before us new life, life built on God's revealed pathway, life empowered by God's spirit at work in us. New life, not the old one we grew up with, not all the assumptions we have held dear from childhood.

Here's what Scripture says about God's pathway, about the new life we are to live:

Happy are those who consider the poor; the LORD delivers them in the day of trouble. (Ps. 41:1)

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. (Isa. 11:1-4)

Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? (Isa. 58:6-7)

Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of my poor people not been restored? O that my head were a spring of water, and my eyes a fountain of tears, so that I might weep day and night for the slain of my poor people! (Jer. 8:22-9:1)

Mortal, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel: prophesy, and say to them—to the shepherds: Thus says the Lord GOD: Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep. You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them. ... Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: Thus says the Lord GOD, I am against the shepherds; and I will demand my sheep at their hand, and put a stop to their feeding the sheep; no longer shall the shepherds feed themselves. I will rescue my sheep from their mouths, so that they may not be food for them. (Ezek 34:2-4, 9-10)

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” (Luke 4:18-19a)

John [the Baptist] summoned two of his disciples and sent them to the Lord to ask, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” ... And [Jesus] answered them, “Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them. (Luke 7:18b-20, 22)

Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority ... These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: ... As you go, proclaim the good news, ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near.’ Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment. (Mt. 10:1, 5a, 7-8)

When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God. (Lev. 19:33-34)

There shall be for both you and the resident alien a single statute, a perpetual statute throughout your generations; you and the alien shall be alike before the LORD. You and the alien who resides with you shall have the same law and the same ordinance. (Num 15:15-16)

“Cursed be anyone who deprives the alien, the orphan, and the widow of justice.” (Dt. 27:19)

Well that's enough of that. You get the message. All those Scriptures point to God's command that we be transformed into people who care for the poor, the sick, the hungry, and who welcome the alien as one of us ... None of that is a liberal or conservative agenda. None of that belongs solely to the Republicans or the Democrats or the Independents. All of that is plainly our Christian agenda. The arguments going on these days in the public square are lacking one significant voice, the voice of the faithful. Oh there are faithful Democrats and faithful Republicans talking to each other. But the faith I'm talking about is not limited to that. It is the faith that God has entrusted to you and to me. We cannot take refuge in our sanctuary and permit the voices of the left or right to drown out the voice of faith.

In this morning's Scripture Jesus called himself the bread of life come down from heaven. At the very least we understand that in terms of the eternal God becoming human, one of us. God did not seek sanctuary in the holiness of his throne room, but entered into the grit and grime, the earthiness of our existence. That is the heart of the good news. God is with us, actively at work creating a new heaven and a new earth. Believing that we know Jesus has the words of eternal life.

Believing that, trusting God in Jesus, becoming one of Jesus' disciples, brings us a new life, a life lived not in the safety of a sanctuary, but in the midst of market place confusion, in the noise of the factory, in the busyness of the office, in the dust of the field, in the sterility of the hospital and in the serenity of the homeless shelter. We go there in the strength of Christ's Spirit, strength given to us as we gather together here to be reminded of God's call to us and to feast on the body and blood of Jesus, God's son. Those who do so will abide in Jesus, and he will abide in them.